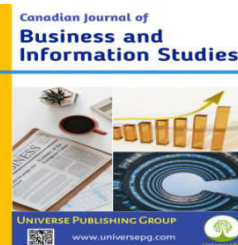




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## The Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust in the Age of Misinformation

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### Abstract

In contemporary organizations, the abundance of digital information and the prevalence of misinformation present significant challenges for effective leadership. This paper introduces the Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust (LIFT), a framework for high-complexity environments increasingly shaped by disinformation, hybrid work, and artificial intelligence (AI). The framework emphasizes five pillars; epistemic awareness, decision transparency, information hygiene, technology-ethical coherence, and cognitive load management, which enable leaders to sustain trust and decision quality under conditions of uncertainty. LIFT centers on the processes by which leaders evaluate, curate, and communicate credible information and challenges prevailing models that overemphasize interpersonal dynamics and proposes a new focus on how leaders think, filter, and act upon information in high-stakes, ambiguous, and digitally mediated contexts. The paper articulates why this framework is urgently needed and outlines practical directions for academic inquiry, organizational implementation, and public policy.

**Keywords:** Epistemic responsibility, Information management, Knowledge Governance, and Transparency.

### 1. Introduction

Leadership in today's workplace is defined not only by a leader's ability to motivate, influence and inspire, but by their capacity to discern, process, and act upon credible information in a landscape saturated with the noise of digital technology. Traditional leadership models, such as transformational theory (Bass, 1985), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and Burns' transactional leadership (1978) have long emphasized traits like ethical conduct, relational transparency, and influence. While these frameworks have proven valuable shaping organizations through better understanding human behaviour and organizational culture,

they were not designed to address the *epistemic complexities* introduced by a digitized, algorithmically mediated, and hybrid work environments. Epistemic complexity refers to a problematic and sometimes confusing environment in which leaders must obtain, assess, and act on knowledge. These complexities develop not only from the abundance of information but also from the challenging nature of determining what is credible, trustworthy, and actionable knowledge in a digital and algorithmically mediated environment. Recent research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a profound effect on the workplace (Ochangco, 2023; Cheong Sin

& Kathiarayan, 2023).

The expanded use of digital tools has created a reliance on these systems, causing an ongoing disruption to the conventional means of collaboration, communication, decision-making, and leading to a shift toward remote and hybrid work models. The result has been a restructuring of companies, departments and offices against the backdrop of the digital environment that has fundamentally altered how information is produced, shared, and interpreted within organizations. Further, the increased adoption of digital tools in recent years has demonstrated that remote work is not only feasible but may also enhance organizational effectiveness (Bloom *et al.*, 2023). This transformation highlights a broader trend in which leadership functions are increasingly accomplished across distributed and physically distant settings supported by virtual collaboration platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This extension and expansion of the workplace beyond a traditional office setting has led to what Lewandowsky *et al.* (2017) describe as an epistemic crisis, or a collapse in our collective confidence in the origins, validity, and implications of information. In the office, factory or workshop, this crisis manifests in several perceptible ways.

- Conflicting narratives about performance and change: As departments operate asynchronously and sometimes siloed across diverse geographic locations through varied platforms, consensus on success or progress becomes fragmented, leading to misalignment across leadership.
- Algorithmic dashboards that obscure insight: Metrics generated within enterprise software are often preselected and presented without context. This results in decisions based on biased or incomplete information (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).
- Diverging epistemic standards among teams: Employees differ in how they assess the credibility of online sources, leading to misaligned interpretations of risk, compliance, and strategic opportunities (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). This is especially prevalent in determining the value of AI-generated content.
- Automation bias and overreliance on AI: As

organizations continue to adopt generative AI for tasks like summarization, hiring, and forecasting, human decision-makers may defer to automated outputs without critically examining their construction or limitations (Hancock *et al.*, 2020).

These developments underscore a crucial gap in contemporary leadership theory and practice. While there is extensive research on the ethical, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions of leadership in a variety of environments, the cognitive conditions and reasoning process that underpin sound judgment, particularly in volatile, information-rich environments, remain understudied. Without a coherent framework to address these conditions, leaders risk operating on distorted premises, relying on flawed data, or delegating core responsibilities to opaque technologies. The core problem is not that leaders need more information in order to perform, rather it is the abundance of data, misinformation, and systemic uncertainty, which suggests that leadership is no longer simply about relational dynamics and empowerment of employees; instead, it is about maintaining clarity, curating trustworthy information, and cultivating trust amid the noise. Traditional leadership theories have not sufficiently addressed the challenges of modern information environments with respect to cognition, ethics, and institutional credibility. As a result, a new model is required that positions epistemic responsibility as a core leadership function, a framework grounded in cognitive integrity and ethical reasoning. The following sections will review the limitations of existing leadership theories in complex environments, then introduce LIFT's theoretical foundations, followed by an explanation of its five operational pillars. The paper concludes by discussing implications for practice, its implementation, and future research.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite decades of leadership scholarship, most existing frameworks emphasize either interpersonal influence (e.g. transformational or servant leadership) or environmental adaptability (e.g. situational or complexity leadership). Very few, however, explicitly address the *cognitive and epistemological burden* that leaders now face: the responsibility to discern, curate, and communicate truth in contexts where misinform-

mation is prevalent and decisions must be made with increasing velocity. Research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Newman *et al.*, 2017) demonstrates that the flow and structure of information significantly influence how groups learn and develop understanding, performance, and trust. However, these insights are rarely integrated into broader theories of leadership. Likewise, leadership literature has under-examined the epistemic dimensions of strategy, specifically how leaders make sense of complex, uncertain realities in ways that shape an organization's ethical direction and sustainability. This theoretical gap has left leaders ill-equipped to maintain decision integrity amid today's information challenges.

To address this gap, this paper proposes a new leadership framework with the aim of fundamentally repositioning leadership practice in high-complexity, post-truth environments. In particular, the model

- Situated epistemic responsibility at the core of leadership practice.
- Integrates psychological safety and mental wellness as cognitive enablers, or preconditions for clear thinking, rather than treating them as peripheral support mechanisms.
- Frames cognitive load management as a critical leadership skill in volatile, information-rich systems.
- Proposes practical strategies for embedding cognitive integrity into organizational life, translating these principles into concrete practices.
- Through these focus areas; the proposed model directly addresses the needs of leaders operating in environments saturated with disinformation and complexity. It addresses a gap in leadership theory by highlighting that the way leaders *think* and handle information and knowledge is just as important as their actions, ability to inspire others or specific behaviours.

## 2. Literature Review

### Leadership in Complex Environments

Contemporary leadership scholarship has increasingly focused on equipping organizations to navigate volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). This has

prompted a proliferation of frameworks such as complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007) and adaptive leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009), which emphasize system responsiveness, decentralization, and emergent learning. These models reflect an important shift away from hierarchical leadership and toward distributed sense-making. However, while these models address organizational agility, they provide limited guidance on how leaders should evaluate, verify, and act upon the knowledge that informs such adaptation. In particular, the role of epistemic judgment, the process by which leaders evaluate the credibility and reliability of information, remains largely unexamined. Research by Tsoukas and Chia, (2002) frames change as a continuous process rather than an episodic process, which is grounded in the interpretation of unfolding complexity. Leadership, within this context is best understood as a continuous interpretive activity whereby leaders make sense of unfolding complexity, attach meaning, and enable organizational growth. Similarly, Maitlis and Christianson, (2014) argue that sense-making is central to how leaders create coherence in ambiguous environments. Nevertheless, these contributions stop short of detailing the cognitive scaffolding required to distinguish truth from falsehood, or relevance from noise, especially in contexts increasingly shaped by misinformation, digital filtering, and algorithmic mediation (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017). The epistemic dimension of leadership, how leaders know what they know and the degree to which their decision premises are credible, is of heightened importance in digitally mediated organizations. According to Greene *et al.* (2016), epistemic cognition is a critical competence in high-stakes environments, involving metacognitive strategies for evaluating evidence, scrutinizing sources, and resisting cognitive bias. Without such competencies, leaders may fall prey to automation bias, heuristics, or unexamined assumptions that degrade decision quality (Kahneman, 2011; Hancock *et al.*, 2020).

Absent an explicit framework to support epistemic responsibility, even the most adaptive or responsive systems risk being anchored in misinformation or cognitive distortion. Uhl-Bien and Arena, (2018) acknowledge that complex leadership must operate

under conditions of uncertainty. However, they do not articulate how leaders should audit or curate the information environment on which their systems depend. As a result, leadership models remain vulnerable to informational collapse, where the apparent responsiveness of a system masks the fact that its foundational knowledge is unreliable or ethically problematic. The Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust (LIFT) addresses this omission by embedding epistemic discernment into the core of leadership practice. Rather than viewing complexity as a condition to be navigated, LIFT asserts that leaders must also interrogate how knowledge is generated, shared, and trusted within organizations. This repositions the leader as not just a sense-maker, but a curator of informational integrity, a necessity in a world where information overload and disinformation are increasingly indistinguishable (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). LIFT thus offers a necessary extension of complexity leadership, one that confronts the epistemic crisis directly through disciplined reasoning, metacognitive rigour, and transparent decision-making processes.

### **Epistemic Responsibility and Misinformation**

As misinformation, disinformation, and algorithmically amplified falsehoods become endemic to organizational life, the leader's role must evolve to include information ethics and what might be called *cognitive hygiene*. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) identify our current milieu as an epistemic crisis, a breakdown in collective capacity to distinguish fact from falsehood. At the same time, research on intellectual virtues (Fricker, 2007; Baehr, 2011) highlights the importance of developing qualities like intellectual humility, integrity, and open-mindedness. These are traits that are rarely put into practice in mainstream leadership theory. Although ethical leadership research (Brown & Treviño, 2006) touches on trust and integrity, it primarily emphasizes leaders' behaviour and moral management rather than their capacity to foster environments of cognitive trust and truth-seeking. The challenge of misinformation demands that leaders move beyond merely acting ethically to actively stewarding the epistemic environment. In this way, a leadership approach that views epistemic responsibility as a central duty offers a fresh

perspective, seeing the ability to judge truth and information quality as essential organizational priorities.

### **Psychological Safety and Cognitive Function**

Psychological safety, defined by Edmondson, (1999) as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, has well-documented benefits for team learning, knowledge sharing, and innovation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman *et al.*, 2017). However, its *cognitive* dimensions remain under-explored in leadership theory. Recent research shows that psychological safety not only encourages open communication but also lightens cognitive load and enhances group reasoning, particularly in complex situations (Frazier *et al.*, 2017). A cognitively safe environment lets team members express doubts and disagreements without fear, supporting distributed cognition, the shared processing of information and ideas. When leaders promote psychological safety, it strengthens their organization's *epistemic capacity* and fosters critical thinking. In an environment flooded with ambiguous data, the ability to think clearly and critically depends on the absence of interpersonal fear. Thus, psychological safety becomes a prerequisite for epistemic quality, not merely an aspect of team morale. A leadership framework centred on cognitive integrity positions psychological safety as a foundational condition for effective sense-making and decision-making.

### **Cognitive Load and Decision-Making**

Leaders in fast-paced, data-saturated contexts face an often invisible constraint: cognitive load. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) distinguishes between intrinsic load (inherent task complexity), extraneous load (distracting or irrelevant information), and germane load (effortful learning activities). In organizational settings, poorly managed information flows can overwhelm decision-makers, impairing their ability to recognize patterns, narrow their moral reasoning, and increase their reliance on mental shortcuts. High cognitive load has been shown to exacerbate bias and error (Kahneman, 2011) and can even become an ethical hazard when critical judgments are made under severe mental strain. Most leadership models overlook this cognitive bottleneck. However, in modern organizations, curating and simplifying

information is itself a leadership act. Eppler and Mengis (2004) describe how information overload can paralyze strategic thought and create confusion. A framework of cognitive integrity insists that leaders must actively manage cognitive load for themselves and their teams by structuring information, setting clear decision pathways, and filtering out noise. By treating cognitive resources as an ethical responsibility, the model aligns with research in human factors and decision science. It recognizes that decisions made under conditions of overload are more susceptible to manipulation and mistakes. Meaning that effective leadership when managing complexity requires not only doing the right thing, but *also thinking in the right way under the right conditions*. This insight connects cognitive psychology and leadership practice in a manner that current theories largely fail to address.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Defining LIFT**

*Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust* refers to the internal consistency and ethical soundness of how leaders and organizations acquire, interpret, and act on information. In essence, it is the alignment between information intake, evaluative reasoning, decision-making, and principled execution. More than just a cognitive skill, cognitive integrity is a leadership disposition rooted in metacognition, critical inquiry, and epistemic humility. It concerns *not* what one believes but how one comes to believe it and how robust that process is under conditions of ambiguity, pressure, or digital mediation. In practice, Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust links the credibility of decisions to the quality of the reasoning processes behind them. This concept builds upon foundations in multiple disciplines. From epistemic cognition research (Greene *et al.*, 2016), we know that how individuals think about knowledge and knowing affects how they evaluate information and make decisions. Leaders with strong epistemic cognition tend to challenge assumptions, carefully evaluate sources, and take multiple perspectives into account. Research in critical information literacy shows how important it is to investigate the origins and purposes of information (Head, 2021).

Simon's, (1979) theory of bounded rationality under-  
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scores that decision-makers in complex environments operate under significant cognitive and informational constraints limiting their knowledge and decision-making capacity. Adding to the understanding, research in AI ethics (Floridi *et al.*, 2018) emphasizes the necessity for algorithmic systems to be both transparent and interpretable. Within this landscape, leaders have a responsibility to ensure that technology clarifies, rather than complicates, human judgment. The role of leadership is to use these technologies in ways that elevate discernment and enable reflective, informed choices. Within our data-saturated, platform-dependent organizations marked by both epistemic instability and structural volatility, the capacity to lead with credibility, through both rigorous reasoning and principled conduct, emerges as a core determinant of leadership effectiveness. This obligation is not merely operational; it bears profound strategic relevance and ethical consequences. Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust, therefore, becomes a prerequisite for effective leadership in modern organizations. For those leaders operating in environments heavily influenced by integrated digital systems and advanced technology, the implications are both strategic and ethical:

- Strategic: High cognitive integrity helps organizations avoid decision paralysis, reduce susceptibility to groupthink, and catch cognitive biases that impair long-term outcomes (Kahneman *et al.*, 2011).
- Ethical: It reinforces trust both public and internal by ensuring decisions are not only well-reasoned but visibly grounded in transparent, defensible processes.

In short, leadership in this era requires that we commit to *how* we know, not just *what* we know, and to uphold rigorous standards of reasoning even in the face of ambiguity and complexity.

#### **Validating Truth and Evidence as a Leadership Imperative**

The practice of leadership at a time marked by accelerated information flows, algorithmic curation, and widespread misinformation means the leader's responsibility no longer ends at decision-making; it begins with epistemic validation. At its core, this entails a disciplined approach to evaluating the credi-

bility, relevance, and origin of knowledge inputs before they are operationalized within organizations and is a deliberate process of determining what can be reasonably known, acted upon, and trusted. Within the Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust, leaders are not passive recipients of information but active stewards of epistemic integrity. This responsibility requires leaders to curate information by critically assessing sources, evaluating evidence using both ethical and normative criteria, and engaging in transparent knowledge practices. Through this process, leaders contribute to the alignment and consistency of organizational decision-making grounded in well-reasoned and ethically sound information. The act of knowing responsibly becomes a systemic behaviour, shaping not only what decisions are made but also how legitimacy is maintained within teams and institutions (Fricker, 2007; Tsoukas, 2005).

Such validation must occur across multiple axes: factual accuracy, methodological soundness, context relevance, and ethical acceptability. The appearance of objectivity is not enough to rely upon. Leaders must create workplaces where critical questioning is encouraged, where epistemic humility coexists with decisive action, and where organizational trust is built on a shared commitment to *verifiable knowledge* (Goldman, 1999). This epistemic labour is often invisible in traditional models of leadership, yet it is foundational. Without it, decisions risk being anchored in bias, convenience, or ideological distortion. The Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust foregrounds this often-overlooked domain by asserting that leadership is not only about what one believes, but how one comes to believe it, and whether that process can withstand scrutiny.

### **Core Principles and Assumptions of LIFT**

Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust of Leadership (LIFT) is the theoretical framework that places epistemic responsibility at the heart of leadership in complex environments. It posits that leaders must be deliberate stewards of knowledge quality, cognitive conditions, and organizational trust. The quality of leadership, from this perspective, is inseparable from the quality of the information and the quality of the processes that a leader creates, utilizes and sustains. LIFT emerges from several key

assumptions:

- *Leadership cannot be effective without reliable knowledge.* The integrity of decisions is directly tied to the credibility of the information and the soundness of the reasoning behind them. Thus, the quality of leadership is inseparable from the quality of information environments leaders cultivate.
- *Cognitive overload is more than a performance risk; it is an ethical hazard.* When leaders and teams are overwhelmed mentally, they are more prone to errors and biases. Managing cognitive load is, therefore, a duty to ensure decisions are made responsibly, not just efficiently.
- *Breakdowns in shared understanding (misinformation, ambiguity, manipulation) are systemic threats to organizational resilience.* In other words, epistemic failures (e.g., the spread of false information) can undermine an organization as surely as operational or financial failures. Leaders must proactively guard against these threats.
- *Psychological safety is a precondition for practical cognition.* It is not merely a nice-to-have cultural element; without psychological safety, individuals cannot think openly or challenge flawed information, impairing collective judgment.
- *Leadership involves curating not just facts but the frameworks for discerning relevance and credibility.* Leaders using LIFT act as sense-making architects, establishing norms and processes that help others differentiate between signal and noise.

In addition to these assumptions, LIFT is built around several core concepts that define its approach.

- *Epistemic Responsibility:* The duty of leaders to ensure decisions are grounded in credible, contextually relevant, and well-communicated information. It is an obligation to pursue truth and accuracy in organizational decision-making.
- *Cognitive Integrity:* A leader's ability to maintain clarity of thought under pressure and navigate complexity without resorting to over-

simplification. It includes modelling disciplined thinking and honesty in the processing of information.

- *Psychological Clarity*: The creation of an environment where team members can think and express ideas freely without fear, the cognitive benefit of psychological safety. It enables teams to examine information and assumptions with a clear head, collectively.
- *Ethical Cognition*: The integration of moral reasoning into strategic and analytical thinking, especially under ambiguity. Leaders exercise ethical judgment about not only *what* decisions are made but also *how* those decisions are derived.
- *Systemic Trust*: The cultivation of long-term confidence in leadership and organizational processes by consistently demonstrating transparency, accountability, and epistemic soundness. Leaders build *institutional trust* by ensuring that the organization's knowledge practices are trustworthy.

### ***Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust as a Leadership Archetype***

#### **The Evolution of Leadership: Integrating LIFT**

Leadership has been widely defined in the literature as a process of influence through which an individual guides a collective toward shared objectives (Nort-house, 2021). Both Burns, (1978) and Kelley, (1992) conceptualize leadership as a reciprocal and collaborative process, where leaders and followers engage together in the pursuit of shared goals and higher purposes. Kotter, (1990) further emphasizes that leadership primarily involves driving change, setting direction, and aligning people's values with new possibilities, thereby distinguishing it from the administrative focus typical of management.

These definitions position leadership as a dynamic, universal process that transcends cultural or positional boundaries, rooted in influence, vision, and ethical purpose (Bass & Bass, 2008). Irrespective of sector or geography, leadership emerges where individuals are called to inspire, guide, and orchestrate collective action toward aspirational futures (Bennis, 2009).

However, these definitions fail to address the growing epistemic demands of leadership in complex, digitally mediated environments where misinformation, cognitive overload, and algorithmic ambiguity challenge the very foundations of sound decision-making. Traditional theories emphasize relational influence or moral guidance, but they often neglect the cognitive infrastructure that underpins ethical and strategic clarity. To address this gap, LIFT redefines leadership to include an epistemically responsible and contextually grounded practice of fostering collective sense-making and ethical decision clarity through reciprocal influence and disciplined reasoning, enabling adaptive action within complex, information-rich systems. This concept expands the meaning of leadership beyond interpersonal dynamics, the ability to influence followers or visionary direction, positioning it as a form of cognitive and moral stewardship essential for navigating the volatility, uncertainty, and fragmentation of the modern world.

#### **Leadership vs. Management: Distinct Functions and Responsibilities**

While leadership and management are often conflated in practice, the scholarly distinction between the two organizational constructs is well established. The prevailing academic perspective is that management emphasizes control, planning, budgeting, and organizing to ensure stability and operational efficiency (Mintzberg, 1975; Kotter, 1990). Leadership, conversely, is concerned with determining and establishing vision, motivating commitment, and navigating change (Yukl, 2013). As Bennis (2009) famously articulated, "managers do things right; leaders do the right things." Rost (1991) discusses the topic further, suggesting that leadership involves multidirectional influence processes centred on values and meaning-making, while management is typically unidirectional, transactional, and authority-based. The distinction becomes particularly salient concerning epistemic responsibility. Leaders are charged with interpreting complex environments, discerning relevance, and guiding their organizations through ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). They engage in continuous sense-making, framing reality for followers and constructing collective meaning amid uncertainty (Maitlis & Christianson,

2014). Therefore, while management operates on the assumption that information is stable and dependable, centred on following established procedures, leadership would imply a more critical approach, one that examines the reliability of information, challenges prevailing assumptions, and brings clarity to complex decisions (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009).

### **Aligning LIFT with the Responsibilities of Leadership**

LIFT explicitly positions itself within the broader leadership discourse, as it is grounded on the leader's epistemic and ethical responsibilities, that leadership effectiveness is inherently tied to the integrity of the information environment that they create. As such, leaders must serve as epistemic stewards, actively curating the knowledge base upon which organizational decisions rest, ensuring information credibility, and modelling disciplined reasoning (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017; Greene *et al.*, 2016).

At the heart of the LIFT framework is the principle of cognitive integrity: the leader's ability to maintain clarity of thought, intellectual honesty, and ethical reasoning under pressure. Unlike management, which focuses on procedural correctness, LIFT asserts that leadership entails transparent, justifiable decision processes where reasoning pathways are made explicit and subject to scrutiny (Kahneman *et al.*, 2011). This epistemic transparency builds systemic trust, extending the leader's ethical duty beyond personal virtue to organizational knowledge governance (Fricker, 2007; Baehr, 2011). Furthermore, LIFT integrates psychological safety as a cognitive enabler, recognizing that open dialogue and dissent are prerequisites for practical organizational reasoning (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier *et al.*, 2017). Leaders who create conditions where thoughtful questioning and critical reflection are part of the norm strengthen followers' ability to think clearly and make sound judgments, thereby enhancing the collective epistemic capacity of an organization (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

### **Extending Leadership Actions for a Complex Era**

LIFT represents an evolution within leadership theory, responding to the unprecedented epistemic challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup>- century information landscape. While transformational (Bass, 1985), ethical (Brown and

Treviño, 2006), adaptive (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009), and complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007) models have progressively expanded leadership's purview, they have difficulty addressing the cognitive dimensions of navigating disinformation, algorithmic mediation, and information saturation (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019; Rahman and Rahman, 2025).

Building on Weick's, (1995) sense-making theory, LIFT formalizes a leader's role as chief sense-making architect, responsible for cultivating shared understanding and epistemic resilience in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). It operationalizes cognitive load management (Sweller, 1988; Eppler & Mengis, 2004) and integrates AI ethics into leadership accountability (Floridi *et al.*, 2018; Morley *et al.*, 2021), recognizing that leaders must actively interrogate and govern the digital tools that increasingly shape organizational cognition. LIFT thus extends the leadership canon by introducing epistemic responsibility as a foundational leadership duty. It reframes leadership not merely as influencing people but as stewarding how truth, knowledge, and reasoned judgment are constructed within organizations. Therefore, LIFT presents a leadership framework that is broadly applicable and specifically designed to navigate the epistemic challenges that define today's complex organizational environments.

### **Operationalizing LIFT: The Framework**

To translate these principles into practice, LIFT is operationalized through five interrelated pillars. Each pillar represents a practice or leadership habit that strengthens the reliability, transparency, and ethical coherence of decision-making in data-saturated environments. Together, these five pillars provide a practical architecture for embedding cognitive integrity across an organization's systems and culture. Rather than stand alone competencies, the five pillars function as interdependent measures that, when integrated, reinforce strategic clarity, moral coherence, and trust in the knowledge environment.

### **Pillars of the Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust**

- *Epistemic Awareness.* Leaders must be able to

distinguish among various types of information, including fact, opinion, misinformation, disinformation, and strategic persuasion. Most adults (leaders included) have received little training in critically evaluating digital content. Studies consistently demonstrate that high levels of formal education do not necessarily translate into the ability to critically evaluate the source and reliability of digital information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). *Epistemic awareness* involves habits like lateral reading (verifying information by consulting multiple sources), source triangulation, and reflective skepticism. Leaders should routinely ask, "How do we know this is true?" and "What if our information is flawed?" Cultivating this reflex strengthens the cognitive foundation for all other pillars.

- *Decision Chain Transparency*. Ethical leadership requires more than good outcomes; it demands *logically coherent and verifiable reasoning*. In order to promote transparency and accountability, a documented account of the decision-making process and the reasoning that informs critical choices should be provided. Tools such as decision logs, dissent mapping, and after-action reports institutionalize this transparency. By making the decision-making process visible, organizations can identify where biases (e.g., anchoring, confirmation bias) might have skewed judgment (Kahneman, Lovallo, & Sibony, 2011). Transparent decision-making chains also enhance accountability and learning: stakeholders can understand not only *what was* decided but *also why* and *how*. In practice, this pillar means a leader habitually asks for and provides reasoning, not just conclusions.
- *Information Hygiene Protocols*. Just as public health relies on hygiene to prevent disease, organizational health relies on information hygiene to prevent misinformation. This involves formal norms for sourcing, validating, cross-checking, and updating information that feeds into decisions. The framework adapts these standards to organizational settings by encouraging evidence audits (periodic reviews of the information base behind ongoing decisions) and

open dialogues about conflicting data. The goal is to treat information quality control as rigorously as financial control.

- *Tech-Ethical Coherence*. As algorithms, large data sets and artificial intelligence become integrated into our daily decision processes, leaders must use technology that aligns with their ethical and epistemic standards. This pillar emphasizes that digital tools should *augment, rather than replace*, leadership reasoning and must be used transparently. Key practices include demanding explainability of the outputs of artificial intelligence, monitoring for bias in algorithms, and involving diverse stakeholders in the evaluation of tech-driven decisions. Morley *et al.* (2021) emphasize that ethical AI requires more than compliance. It needs an intentional design for moral clarity. Leaders should understand how an AI system arrives at its recommendations, which variables it considers, and what trade-offs are built into its logic. When such transparency is absent, there is a risk of moral distancing ("the algorithm made the call, not me"). Tech-ethical coherence means leaders proactively align their use of technology with the organization's values and epistemic standards.
- *Cognitive Load Mapping*. This pillar involves actively assessing and managing the cognitive burden on individuals and teams. Information overload can paralyze strategy and breed confusion (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Leaders implementing the framework conduct regular cognitive load assessments, asking: How much information are we processing? How complex or ambiguous is it? How urgent or emotionally charged? By mapping out the volume and difficulty of incoming information, leaders can then *reduce nonessential noise*, clarify priorities, and design workflows that respect human cognitive limits. For instance, a leader might streamline reporting dashboards to highlight truly critical metrics or stagger decision meetings to avoid fatigue. The ethical aspect emerges in recognizing that chronically overloading staff not only harms performance but can lead to flawed or unjust decisions. Managing cognitive load thus

becomes part of a leader's duty of care.

When integrated, these pillars reinforce one another. For example, maintaining epistemic awareness (Pillar 1) makes it natural to establish information hygiene protocols (Pillar 3). Ensuring decision transparency (Pillar 2) builds systemic trust, which in turn encourages psychological safety, supporting epistemic awareness by inviting scrutiny. Tech-ethical coherence (Pillar 4) and cognitive load mapping (Pillar 5) together ensure that technological augmentation and information volume do not undermine the other pillars. Utilizing the framework, LIFT provides leaders with a concrete approach for *institutionalizing cognitive integrity* within their organizations.

### ***Positioning LIFT among Leadership Theories***

#### **How LIFT Extends Leadership Principles**

The Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust (LIFT) constitutes a new leadership approach because it redefines the core unit of leadership from influence or behaviour to epistemic responsibility. Unlike existing models such as transformational, adaptive, or complexity leadership, which emphasize motivation, agility, or emergent structures, LIFT centers on how leaders think, discern, and act under cognitive and informational pressure. It introduces a novel set of constructs, such as epistemic awareness, decision-chain transparency, and cognitive load mapping, that address a blind spot in the leadership canon: the ethical and cognitive quality of the decision-making process itself. By framing leadership as the disciplined curation and governance of knowledge within complex, digitally mediated systems, LIFT extends the boundaries of leadership theory to include epistemology, information ethics, and cognitive science. Its prescriptive and operationalizable framework offers both conceptual innovation and practical tools, distinguishing it as a normative theory suited for the epistemic and ethical challenges of the 21st century. As such, LIFT builds on past leadership models but diverges in key ways to address the unique challenges of the digital age

- **Transformational Leadership:** LIFT shares the aspiration for morally principled leadership that underlies transformational leadership but rejects charisma as a proxy for epistemic

reliability. In LIFT, a leader's credibility stems not only from inspiring vision but also from demonstrable thoughtfulness and truthfulness in decision-making.

- **Ethical Leadership:** Like ethical leadership, LIFT emphasizes moral stewardship. However, it extends the leader's responsibility beyond modelling ethical behaviour into governing the information ecology. A LIFT leader ensures that the organization's data, analyses, and knowledge flows meet ethical standards of accuracy and fairness, thereby linking morality with information management.
- **Complexity and Adaptive Leadership:** LIFT acknowledges the unpredictability and emergent nature of complex systems, as emphasized by complexity and adaptive leadership theories. However, it critiques these models for lacking *epistemic scaffolding*. LIFT adds that scaffolding involves prescribing how leaders can maintain the clarity and integrity of information in the face of complexity rather than simply reacting or "performing" with the system.
- **Servant Leadership:** LIFT embodies the human centred ethos of servant leadership, particularly its emphasis on humility and service to others. It reinterprets "service" as epistemic care, serving followers and stakeholders by safeguarding the integrity of the knowledge and decisions that affect them. In this sense, a leader implementing the pillars found within LIFT is a servant of truth and learning, not just to people's needs.

Through this synthesis, LIFT reframes leadership not simply as a set of behaviours or relational moves but as a disciplined practice of *cognitive and ethical stewardship* suited to complex systems. It elevates the acts of questioning, information curating, and critical thinking to core leadership duties. In doing so, LIFT is not a peripheral add-on to the leadership canon but a foundational reorientation of what effective leadership means. It treats the pursuit of truth, transparency, and clarity as fundamental leadership obligations. This approach equips leaders to lead not just effectively but

also credibly and ethically in an era where the very notion of truth is often a contested terrain.

### 3. Discussion

#### Theoretical Contributions of LIFT

Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust offers a novel integration of ideas that addresses a critical blind spot in existing leadership theory. By centring leadership on epistemic responsibility and cognitive clarity, LIFT redefines leadership as both a cognitive and a moral discipline, not just a behavioural or relational one. This reframing yields several key contributions to leadership scholarship

- Expanding the Imperative of Leadership to Information Quality: LIFT introduces a systemic approach to *epistemic responsibility*, treating the quality of information and knowledge governance as a leadership imperative. In traditional models, leaders might assume they have stable, trustworthy information to act on; LIFT challenges this assumption and directly responds to what Lewandowsky *et al.* (2017) refer to as the epistemic crisis. Leaders are tasked with actively managing truth and falsehood in their domain, thereby broadening the scope of leadership beyond influence and vision to include the curation of credible knowledge. This positions leaders as guardians of their organization's *epistemic infrastructure*.
- Linking Psychological Safety to Cognitive Excellence: LIFT positions psychological safety not merely as a facet of team dynamics but as essential to the cognitive processes of an organization. Prior studies have linked a safe climate to improved problem-solving and creativity (Newman *et al.*, 2017); LIFT extends this by anchoring psychological safety in *epistemic integrity*. It posits that without psychological safety, even technically skilled teams cannot realize their full cognitive potential because fear will suppress questioning and critical evaluation. By elevating psychological safety to a necessary condition for clear thinking, LIFT bridges organizational psychology findings with leadership ethics, showing that treating people well (ensuring they

feel safe to speak up) is directly tied to making better decisions.

- Framing Decision-Making under Complexity as an Ethical Practice: Unlike adaptive leadership, which emphasizes quick responsiveness and agility, LIFT calls for anticipatory cognitive stewardship, curating clarity before decisions and modelling transparency when certainty is elusive. This reframes decision-making in volatile environments as an ethical exercise in honesty and rigour, not just a test of agility or intuition. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge uncertainty openly, to document how decisions are made and to justify them in hindsight. In doing so, LIFT counters the notion that effective leadership is equivalent to decisiveness or bold action alone. Instead, it argues that *how* one decides (the openness and clarity of that process) is as important ethically as the outcomes. This challenges more reductionist leadership models and promotes an ethos of intellectual humility and candour in leadership practice.

Moreover, LIFT bridges the gap between cognitive science and leadership practice. While insights from psychology and decision science, such as Kahneman's, (2011) dual-system theory of thought, have shed light on how humans make judgments, they have rarely been incorporated into prescriptive leadership frameworks. LIFT operationalizes these cognitive insights into concrete leadership obligations (e.g., avoiding heuristic traps by structuring deliberation), effectively bringing the science of judgment into the realm of leadership theory. It also intersects with organizational learning literature by emphasizing that many failures of leadership (e.g., groupthink, cascades of misinformation, dangerous overconfidence) are *preventable* through what might be termed epistemic scaffolding, deliberate structures and norms that support sound thinking. In summary, LIFT is not just another leadership style or competency model; it represents a foundational shift in what we expect leaders to do. It contends that the credibility of leadership rests on the credibility of the leader's thinking processes, as demonstrated to others. By embedding concepts such as epistemic humility, narrative transparency, and

cognitive rigour into the definition of leadership, LIFT enriches the leadership canon with an approach finely tuned to the demands of the information age. It equips leaders to lead not only effectively but *legitimately* in environments where trust in information is as pivotal as trust in people.

### **Distinctiveness and Innovation of the Model**

The approach to leadership derived from LIFT represents a significant departure from existing leadership paradigms. Whereas most leadership models implicitly assume that leaders operate against a backdrop of shared truths and reliable data, LIFT acknowledges that these assumptions no longer hold in many modern contexts. This recognition underlies several distinctive features of the framework

- **Focus on Decision Quality over Leader Style:** Traditional discourse often fixates on *who* the leader is (traits, styles) and how they inspire followers. LIFT instead centers on *how the leader thinks* and the *quality of their decisions*. It shifts attention from personality to process, essentially asserting that a leader's value lies in the integrity of their cognition as much as in their charisma or interpersonal skill. This reorientation enables organizations to evaluate and develop leaders based on critical thinking and judgment rather than influence or communication flair.
- **Formalizing Epistemic Trust:** LIFT defines and operationalizes the notion of epistemic trust within organizations. In doing so, it extends concepts like psychological safety and transparency into the cognitive domain. Epistemic trust refers to confidence in the processes by which information is vetted and decisions are made. By making epistemic trust a goal, LIFT encourages leaders to ensure that their teams and stakeholders trust *the process by which decisions are made*, not mindlessly, but because those processes are known to be sound and practical. This is a novel construct; few prior models explicitly address trust in an organization's knowledge and decision systems.
- **Structured Practices Absent in Other Models:** The framework offers a suite of tangible

practices (decision audits, information hygiene protocols, cognitive load mapping, etc.) that are not found in existing leadership theories. These practices give LIFT a practical edge as it is immediately actionable. Leaders can implement specific routines and tools to enhance cognitive integrity, whereas many leadership models remain abstract (e.g., being inspirational or demonstrating empathy are valuable but not procedural). LIFT's emphasis on *how* to do leadership through defined practices makes it particularly suited for organizations seeking concrete interventions.

- **Integration of AI Ethics into Leadership:** Unlike most treatments that relegate AI and data governance to technical experts or compliance officers, LIFT integrates technology ethics directly into leadership responsibilities. This reflects the reality that algorithmic decision systems now influence strategic choices, personnel decisions, and other key decisions. Leaders cannot afford to be hands-off when it comes to AI. By incorporating tech-ethical coherence as a pillar, LIFT ensures that questions of algorithmic bias, transparency, and accountability are integral to the leadership conversation, not an afterthought.

In combination, these features make LIFT new in both its components and its underlying assumptions. Most leadership models tacitly presume a world of stable truths and shared facts; LIFT starts from the opposite premise that we are in a fragmented, contested information space, and builds up a leadership approach from there. Doing so fills an urgent need for organizations navigating the moral, strategic, and epistemic turbulence of the 21st century. In sum, the Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust uniquely equips leaders to embed epistemic responsibility into their practice, treat cognitive processes as a domain of organizational integrity, and link their legitimacy to the transparency and soundness of their decision-making infrastructure. It represents not a minor tweak to the leadership playbook but a comprehensive update for an age in which managing information and truth has become as central to leadership as managing people and resources. LIFT is not only a conceptual

advancement but also a living framework designed for iterative development and cross-disciplinary application. Its implementation requires deliberate integration into organizational systems, leadership development programs, research efforts, and public governance. The following domains illustrate how the Framework can be applied, tested, and institutionalized in practice.

### Organizational Application

Within organizations, embedding LIFT begins with weaving its principles into existing processes for strategy and risk management. Many organizations already recognize that decision-making under uncertainty is a significant vulnerability (Kahneman *et al.*, 2011), and LIFT provides tools to fortify those decisions. Key actions for leaders and organizations include

- Integrate LIFT into risk management and audits: Introduce checkpoints in enterprise risk management that reflect the Framework pillars. For instance, before approving major strategic initiatives or high-stakes decisions, conduct an *epistemic audit* to ensure information sources have been vetted (information hygiene) and the reasoning process is documented (decision transparency).
- Establish information hygiene norms organization-wide: Build formal protocols for sourcing and validating information into workflows. This could involve updating standard operating procedures to ensure that any data presented in meetings cites its source and recency, or implementing regular "evidence reviews" where teams revisit the data behind ongoing projects.
- Apply deliberative reviews for critical decisions: For significant projects or crisis responses, use techniques like red teaming (assigning a team to challenge assumptions) or after-action reviews focused on the decision process to trace the epistemic chain of events. This helps catch biases or gaps in hindsight and creates learning for future decisions.

Organizations may also consider appointing roles or committees responsible for cognitive integrity. For example, a *Chief Knowledge Integrity Officer* or a cross-functional "cognitive integrity council" could

oversee information flows, AI systems, and decision-making processes to ensure they meet the standards of the Framework. Such roles signal the organization's commitment to epistemic quality and provide accountability for maintaining it.

### Research and Evaluation

As a new framework, LIFT should be rigorously evaluated and refined through interdisciplinary research. Scholars and practitioners can collaborate on studies that examine LIFT's impact and further develop its constructs:

- Quantitative measures of epistemic leadership behaviours: Research can work on developing and validating instruments or surveys to assess how well leaders exhibit LIFT behavior's (e.g., an "Epistemic Leadership Scale" that measures things like information validation practices, transparency of reasoning, and encouragement of dissent). These tools would help quantify an otherwise qualitative concept, allowing for large-sample studies.
- Impact on organizational outcomes: Studies could compare organizations (or units within an organization) that implement LIFT practices with those that do not, examining outcomes including innovation rates, decision quality, error rates, crisis response effectiveness, and employee trust. For example, does a team that keeps decision logs and encourages critical debate make better strategic choices than a similar team that does not? Such comparative research would illuminate LIFT's practical value.
- Case studies and longitudinal research: In-depth case studies of organizations that adopt a cognitive integrity initiative would provide rich qualitative data on challenges and successes. Longitudinal research following leaders over time as they develop LIFT competencies could show how it affects their careers and organizational performance. For instance, a longitudinal study might track new managers trained in LIFT principles to see if their teams exhibit higher adaptability and trust over several years.

Collaboration across fields such as organizational psychology, behavioural economics, information science,

AI ethics, and more will enrich this research. Partnering with think tanks, innovation labs, or consortia that bridge academia and industry can accelerate evidence generation and ensure that findings are effectively translated into practice.

### Limitations

As an emerging theory framework, LIFT is accompanied by several limitations. First, while LIFT is grounded in a broad base of interdisciplinary research, its comprehensive nature means it has not yet been thoroughly tested or validated in diverse organizational contexts. Many of its claims (e.g. that implementing the Framework pillars will measurably improve decision quality or trust) remain hypotheses to be empirically examined. Early adopters of LIFT may encounter skepticism or conceptual challenges in translating its ideals into routine practice; the idea of conducting "epistemic audits" or appointing "cognitive integrity officers" might strike some as abstract or unnecessary in industries not yet attuned to these concerns. Without clear evidence of payoff, organizations may view LIFT as an intellectual exercise rather than an urgent imperative.

The model also faces practical limitations, such as organizational inertia and resource constraints. Implementing framework pillars (for example, setting up new review processes or training programs) requires time and effort and may slow down some decisions in the short term. Organizations under heavy short-term pressure might resist such changes. Additionally, leaders themselves need development to excel at these cognitive and ethical tasks – skills not traditionally emphasized. Not every leader currently in place will easily adapt to the roles of epistemic curator or sense-making facilitator, especially if they rose through the ranks valuing decisiveness over reflectiveness.

Finally, LIFT, as presented, is idealistic. It assumes leaders *want* to do the right thing epistemically and need a framework to help them do so. In reality, leaders may sometimes find the tension between epistemic rigour and expediency difficult to manage. There may be cases where fully transparent reasoning or thorough information vetting is at odds with the need for urgency or political expediency. LIFT does

not eliminate tough judgment calls; it instead shines a light on them. This means that the actual test of LIFT will be whether leaders can uphold cognitive integrity when it conflicts with other pressures. In light of these limitations, it is essential to approach LIFT as a guiding framework that will continue to evolve. Early practitioners and researchers should carefully document challenges so the model can be refined. The concept of cognitive integrity might need tailoring to fit different industries or cultures. Moreover, acknowledging limitations suggests one more leadership virtue: *patience*. The shift to a cognitively integral organization will not happen overnight, and partial implementations might yield partial benefits. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the pursuit of cognitive integrity addresses a void that can no longer be ignored. Future work should explore how leaders can exert influence toward epistemic integrity, even in systems they do not fully control, and how to scale LIFT principles sustainably.

### Future Research Directions

To refine the LIFT framework, further research is necessary on multiple fronts. Key directions for future inquiry include:

- **Measurement of Epistemic Leadership:** Developing quantitative instruments to assess *epistemic leadership behaviours* and organizational epistemic climate. Reliable metrics could measure, for example, the extent to which decision processes in an organization are transparent or the degree of trust employees have in leadership's information handling. These tools would enable systematic testing of LIFT's impact. **Longitudinal and Outcome Studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies that examine the impact of adopting LIFT practices on organizational outcomes over time. For instance, researchers could track whether organizations that train leaders in LIFT principles see improvements in innovation, error reduction, crisis management effectiveness, or employee engagement compared to control groups. Similarly, studying changes in trust (internal and external) after implementing LIFT would be valuable.
- **LIFT in the Digital/AI Context:** Exploring how

LIFT interacts with ongoing digital transformation and AI governance in organizations. Research questions include: *How do leaders applying LIFT handle the introduction of AI in their decision processes differently than those who do not?* Moreover, *does a high level of cognitive integrity mitigate issues such as algorithmic bias or data misuse?* Given the rapid uptake of AI tools, understanding LIFT's role in shaping AI policy and practice in organizations will be crucial.

- **Epistemic Leadership in Crises:** Investigating the role of epistemic leadership in crisis management and post-crisis recovery. Crises (public health emergencies, cybersecurity breaches, etc.) are times of high information stress and uncertainty. Studying leaders who exemplify cognitive integrity during crises - by being transparent about what is known or unknown, updating decisions as new data arrives, and dispelling rumours - could illustrate the framework's value. It could also reveal where it needs adaptation for high-pressure scenarios.

In pursuing these directions, a mix of methodologies will be helpful. Qualitative case studies can provide deep insight into how LIFT functions in real organizational contexts, the obstacles encountered, and the creative solutions leaders devise. Action research (where researchers collaborate with organizations to implement LIFT and observe the process) would be instrumental in improving the framework iteratively. Design-based research could help develop and test specific interventions (like a "cognitive integrity training module" or an "epistemic audit toolkit") in organizational settings and refine them based on feedback. Cross-sector collaborations will enrich this research. For example, partnerships between academic researchers and organizations in healthcare, education, or technology can provide test beds for LIFT principles while addressing sector-specific epistemic challenges. A hospital, a university, and a tech company might all pilot LIFT practices and share lessons, given that each deal with different forms of complexity and information overload. Insights from such collaborations can then inform

public policy recommendations and broader adoption. Overall, future research should aim not only to validate LIFT's claims but to adapt and expand the framework. The goal is to develop a robust, evidence-based understanding of *how* leaders can best foster cognitive integrity, under what conditions it flourishes, and what tangible benefits it yields for organizations and society.

#### 4. Conclusion

In today's environment, leaders confront not a shortage of information but an overwhelming surplus, where the true challenge lies in discerning what is credible, relevant, and actionable. The traditional expectations of leadership, motivating teams, influencing followers and delivering strategy are now accompanied by the pressing responsibility of navigating a digital landscape saturated with misinformation, algorithmic bias, and cognitive overload. This shift requires a fundamental reorientation of leadership practice toward epistemic stewardship. The Leadership Integrity Framework for Trust (LIFT) directly responds to this demand by embedding epistemic awareness, decision transparency, information hygiene, and cognitive load management into the core of leadership responsibility. Far from being an abstract theory, LIFT offers a practical architecture for restoring trust, coherence, and ethical clarity to organizations facing both external volatility and internal fragmentation of decision-making processes. Its adoption carries profound strategic implications: institutions that implement its principles are better positioned to filter noise, recognize risks early, and innovate responsibly based on sound knowledge. Ethically, the model raises the standard for leadership in the digital age, insisting that how decisions are made is as important as the outcomes they produce. In doing so, LIFT reframes leadership from a primarily behavioural enterprise into a cognitive discipline grounded in critical reflection, epistemic humility, and transparent reasoning. This reconceptualization highlights that genuine authority in modern organizations stems from credibility in thought as much as from charisma or influence. Ultimately, the framework offers more than a means of avoiding error; it provides a pathway for cultivating institutional wisdom, strengthening epistemic trust, and sustaining legitimacy in an

era where information itself is contested. Leaders who embrace this model can demonstrate integrity not only in results but in the very processes by which those results are achieved, embodying a form of leadership suited to the complexity of our times.

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