

Holistic Leadership

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Abstract

This study deals with the holistic leadership approach, which is gaining importance among contemporary leadership theories, at a conceptual level. Holistic leadership defines leadership as a multidimensional process of consciousness by bringing together an individual's inner awareness, ethical sensitivity, cognitive integrity, and systems thinking capacity. The aim of the study is to examine the foundations of holistic leadership and explain why this approach is becoming increasingly important in today's organizational environments dominated by digitalization, complex systems, and multi-stakeholder structures. In this study, firstly, the concept of holistic leadership is discussed on the basis of holism philosophy, system theory, and the holistic thinking approach. Then, through a comparative analysis with contemporary leadership models such as transformational, servant, authentic, and spiritual leadership, it is revealed that holistic leadership constitutes a “superframe” that synthesizes these models. The study emphasized that core competencies such as mindfulness, balance, systems thinking, and ethical sensitivity constitute the behavioral foundations of holistic leadership. In the practice dimension, it was determined that holistic leadership supports innovation and employee engagement in organizations and contributes to ethical and sustainable decision-making processes. In this respect, holistic leadership has a transformative potential not only for managerial efficiency but also for human development and organizational integrity. In this respect, the study reveals that holistic leadership brings a new perspective to the leadership literature and provides a multidisciplinary theoretical basis for future research.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century's rapidly changing business world, leadership is being redefined not only as a managerial role but also as a systemic process of awareness and meaning-making (Subrahmanyam, 2025). Digital transformation, globalization, multi-stakeholder structures, and

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sustainability pressures are pushing the boundaries of traditional leadership approaches (Buonocore et al., 2024). In this transformation environment, it is not enough for leaders to have only technical knowledge or operational skills; they need to be able to comprehend the organization, employees, environment, and society from a holistic perspective (Kodama, 2025). In this context, the concept of holistic leadership emerges as an approach that goes beyond fragmented ways of thinking and bases leadership on multidimensional, systemic, and ethical foundations (Khan, 2025; Quatro et al., 2007).

Holistic leadership is based on the philosophy of “holism”, derived from the Latin root “holos” (whole). Holism argues that in order to understand a system, it is necessary to look beyond its constituent parts and that each part gains meaning only in relation to the whole (Dos Santos, 2023). When this approach is adapted to the field of leadership, it emphasizes that the interactions between leaders themselves, their followers, the organizational structure, environmental dynamics, and the value system should be evaluated as a whole. Therefore, a holistic leader is not only a person who sets goals and gives direction, but also a transformative actor who creates meaning, builds values, has high inner awareness, and makes decisions based on ethical foundations (Avolio, 2010; Khan, 2025).

Today’s organizations operate in environments dominated by the concepts of “uncertainty” and “complexity” due to their complex system structures and constantly changing conditions. With digitalization, information flow has accelerated, and artificial intelligence and automation systems have become effective in decision-making processes. This situation has increased the importance of not only rational and cognitive skills but also holistic qualities such as emotional intelligence, ethical sensitivity, systemic thinking, and awareness in leadership processes (Topcuoglu et al., 2023). In this respect, holistic leadership stands out as a model that strengthens not only organizational performance but also employees’ psychological well-being and organizational resilience (Barr & Nathenson, 2022).

The rationale for the emergence of holistic leadership is largely related to the inadequacy of existing leadership approaches in explaining organizational complexities. Transformational leadership offers a powerful model in terms of motivating employees and developing a vision, but falls short in terms of individual meaning, ethical responsibility, and systemic awareness (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Similarly, although servant and authentic leadership approaches emphasize human-centered values, they offer a limited perspective in terms of environmental sustainability, spiritual balance, and

the integrity of the organizational ecosystem (Kim et al., 2024). Holistic leadership fills this gap and proposes a “meta-framework” (meta-model) that takes into account the interdependence between people, systems, and the environment (Tripathi, 2021).

This study aims to explain the theoretical foundations of the holistic leadership concept and its importance in the organizational context. In this context, it is argued that leadership is not only a task function but also a multidimensional process of awareness and influence. The study first presents the conceptual framework of holistic leadership, followed by a comparative analysis with current leadership models such as transformational, servant, authentic, and spiritual leadership. These comparisons aim to show that holistic leadership offers a holistic leadership model that encompasses, yet transcends, these approaches. Thus, it aims to both contribute to the theoretical literature and to provide a holistic perspective that will guide contemporary leadership practices.

2. Holistic Leadership Concept

Holistic leadership is a leadership approach that considers the individual, the organization, and the environment not as disconnected elements but as a dynamic whole that interacts with each other (Wu, 2024). The complex, ambiguous, and multidimensional problems that leaders face in today’s organizations require more applications than classical leadership approaches. In this context, holistic leadership comes to the forefront as an understanding that is not limited to managerial skills, but integrates the individual’s inner awareness, ethical sensitivity, systemic thinking skills, and meaning-making capacity (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024).

Holistic leadership can be defined as “a multi-layered approach to leadership that combines the emotional, cognitive, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of leadership and addresses the individual-organization-environment interaction as a whole” (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2011; Dhiman, 2017). This model focuses not only on performance or outcomes but also on the way the leader makes sense of himself, his followers, the values of the organization, and the whole system. Holistic leaders, on the other hand, have a vision that can establish harmony between the individual’s inner world and the outer world, integrate personal values with organizational goals, and observe ethical balance in their decisions (Khan, 2025).

Conceptually, holistic leadership is a holistic synthesis of transformational, authentic, servant, and spiritual leadership models, bringing together the

visionary aspect of transformational leadership, the internal consistency of authentic leadership, the human-centered perspective of servant leadership, and the meaning and value generation dimension of spiritual leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The philosophical foundations of holistic leadership are based on the philosophy of holism, system theory, and integral thinking approaches (Yücelbalkan, 2024). Holism represents an ontological understanding that prioritizes the whole over the parts. From a philosophical perspective, holistic leadership is based on the cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual integrity of human beings (Gemechu, 2022). Holistic leadership argues that the balance between individual consciousness, cultural values, and systemic structure is the essence of leadership, and assumes that knowledge and meaning are generated not only analytically but also relationally and experientially (Senge, 1990).

Holistic leadership consists of four basic contexts: emotional, cognitive, ethical, and spiritual, and the emotional dimension refers to the leader's capacity to recognize, manage, and balance their own emotions and the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence constitutes the core of holistic leadership and creates an environment of trust within the organization through emotional awareness, empathy, and communication skills (Dhiman, 2018). The cognitive dimension encompasses the leader's systemic thinking, strategic analysis, and the ability to analyze complex relationships (Khan, 2025). Holistic leaders do not limit events to cause-and-effect relationships; they make decisions by considering all stakeholders and processes of the system (Senge, 1990).

The ethical dimension enables the leader to make decisions based on values, responsibility, and justice. In holistic leadership, ethics is not merely a normative concept, but one that is central to the leader's identity and organizational culture. Ethical sensitivity enables the leader to balance the needs of individuals with organizational goals and social responsibility (Evers, 1992). The spiritual dimension represents the holistic leader's capacity to create meaning, enabling them to reconstruct both their own purpose for being and the collective meaning of the organization (Dhiman, 2018).

In summary, the holistic leadership model gives a new meaning to leadership by linking the inner integrity of the individual, the ethical and systemic balance of the organization, and the sustainable development goals of society, and represents not only a performance-based approach, but also a human-centered, value-oriented, and awareness-based leadership paradigm.

3. Basic Principles of Holistic Leadership Model

The holistic leadership model argues that the leader is not only a figure who manages organizational processes, but also a guide of meaning that establishes a balance between people, system, and environment (Starik, 2004). This model suggests that a holistic leadership approach should be built not only on skills and knowledge, but also on awareness, ethical consciousness, and sustainable values, and is based on three main principles. The principles of self-awareness and integrity, systemic balance and ethical harmony, sustainability, and value-based management determine the direction of the leader's relationships with self, others, and the system and help to explain the multidimensional nature of the leadership process (Capra, 1997).

Self-awareness is one of the basic building blocks of holistic leadership, and leaders' awareness of their own feelings, thoughts, values, and behaviors emerges as a prerequisite for both personal integrity and leadership effectiveness (Goleman, 2013). Self-awareness enables leaders to establish consistency between their inner world and their external behaviors, and leaders display an authentic stance towards both themselves and their environment (Dhiman, 2018). The principle of integrity refers to the capacity of leaders to create harmony between their values, behaviors, and decisions. The concept of integrity emphasizes the essence of ethical leadership and the trustworthiness of leaders, and reflects the consistency of holistic leaders in their inner world, creating trust-based relationships (Northouse, 2025).

The second principle of holistic leadership, systemic balance, argues that the leader should perceive the organization as a living system (Capra, 1997). Based on the assumption that every organization consists of interdependent subsystems and that the balance of the whole is negatively affected when these systems do not work in harmony, the holistic leader has a vision that can understand these systemic relationships and maintain balance in change processes (Orlov, 2003).

Systemic balance is also related to the leader's ability to manage relationships between stakeholders within an ethical framework, with holistic leaders emphasizing the ethical quality of processes, not just outcomes, and positioning themselves as a facilitator who strengthens connections within the system, not just a controller (Senge, 1990).

The third principle of holistic leadership is value-oriented management based on sustainability. Sustainability is not just an environmental or economic concept, but refers to the capacity to create continuity and

meaning at all levels of leadership, and the holistic leader aims to build long-term values beyond short-term achievements (Kodama, 2025).

In this context, it can be said that the basic principles of the holistic leadership model consist of a holistic philosophy of life that shapes systemic balance, ethical behavior, sustainability, and long-term impact vision, and enables the transformation of the individual, organization, and society together (Topçuoğlu & Kaygın, 2023).

4. Holistic Leadership and Other Leadership Models

Holistic leadership can be considered a superior model that goes beyond and integrates many contemporary approaches in the leadership literature. This model brings together the basic principles of transformational, servant, authentic, and spiritual leadership approaches. It has the capacity to transform leadership not only as a process focused on individual achievement or performance, but also as an understanding of people, systems, and values (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). In this respect, holistic leadership offers a holistic concept among different leadership models and aims to overcome their limitations.

When holistic leadership is examined in terms of its relationship with leadership types such as transformational, spiritual, and servant leadership, it is seen that it adopts the visionary and motivational aspect of the transformational leadership model and enriches it with emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions (Singh, 2002). Transformational leaders are leaders who unite followers around a common goal by mobilizing their intrinsic motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). While transformational leadership focuses more on organizational performance and change processes, holistic leadership considers the inner transformation of the individual and systemic harmony (Singh, 2002).

When considered in the context of servant and authentic leadership models, it can be seen that holistic leadership is an approach that incorporates both models. Servant leadership is a model that defines the main purpose of leadership as “to serve”, where leaders use their power not to establish control or authority, but to unleash the potential of others and contribute to society (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023). Authentic leadership, on the other hand, emphasizes the consistency between leaders’ internal values and external behaviors, placing inner awareness, harmony, transparency, and ethical consistency at the center of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Holistic leadership is an approach that incorporates both models, combining the human-centered sensitivity of servant leadership with the inner integrity

of authentic leadership, and also balancing ethical responsibility and social sustainability while integrating these two approaches.

When holistic leadership is considered with spiritual leadership, it is seen to be compatible in terms of its value and purpose-based aspect. Spiritual leaders help individuals to connect not only to their work but also to a higher purpose (Samul, 2024). While holistic leadership is based on the meaning and value creation aspect of spiritual leadership, spiritual leadership represents the “spiritual depth” of holistic leadership, whereas holistic leadership offers a more inclusive concept that extends this depth with the dimensions of systemic awareness, balance, and sustainability (Subhaktiyasa et al., 2023).

Holistic leadership is a synthesizing framework that incorporates and connects each of the aforementioned leadership models. This synthesis transforms leadership into a philosophy of life based on awareness, ethical consciousness, systemic thinking, and emotional integrity, rather than merely a form of behavior or personality trait (Senge, 1990). This multidimensional structure of the holistic leader transforms organizations from being structures that only produce economic value to systems that act with ethical, social, and environmental responsibility. In this respect, holistic leadership can be considered as a holistic model that feeds on each of the contemporary leadership theories, but combines them in a holistic paradigm by removing them from being singular categories (Dhiman, 2018).

5. Key Features of Holistic Leadership

Holistic leadership suggests that leadership is not just a position but encompasses concepts such as awareness and ethical responsibility. In this approach, leaders’ effectiveness depends not only on their technical knowledge but also on the quality of the relationship they establish with their inner world and their environment. The holistic leader advocates an approach that can combine his/her own inner values with organizational goals and societal expectations in harmony and create meaning and integrity (Kodama, 2025). In this context, four key elements that determine the effectiveness of a holistic leader stand out: awareness, balance, systems thinking, and ethical sensitivity (Zohar & Marshall, 2004).

Mindfulness is the most fundamental competency at the center of holistic leadership. Defined as the ability to recognize and make sense of one’s own inner state, feelings, and thoughts, and to manage their impact on behavior, mindfulness includes environmental and systemic awareness as well as individual awareness in terms of holistic leadership (Oktaysoy, 2025).

Mindfulness helps the leader to manage conflicts within the organization, develop empathy and make ethical decisions, and nourishes the leader's visionary capacity (Khan, 2025).

The second core competency of holistic leadership is the ability to establish balance, which refers to the leader's capacity to pursue a fair, harmonious, and sustainable path in environments where different stakeholders, values, and goals conflict (Northouse, 2025). This balance has both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions; intrinsic balance enables leaders to establish consistency between their emotional states, stress levels, and decision-making processes, while extrinsic balance represents the leader's ability to create harmony between the organization, the environment, and stakeholders (Kodama, 2025). Holistic leaders maintain this balance by basing their decisions not only on rational analysis but also on emotional intuition and ethical awareness, which helps them to achieve both organizational efficiency and the psychological well-being of employees (Yaraş & Özcan, 2019).

Systems thinking is a cognitive competence that enables the holistic leader to understand and manage a complex network of relationships, and for the holistic leader, this competence is the ability to see the whole and not the parts. Systems thinking also strengthens the holistic leader's strategic foresight and problem-solving skills (Northouse, 2025). This skill enhances the leader's ability to act strategically, especially in the face of digitalization, globalization, and the complexity of multi-stakeholder structures, and enables the continuous development of both individuals and organizations through systems thinking (Fry, 2008).

Ethical sensitivity refers to the conscientious dimension of holistic leadership, arguing that the leader should consider not only the consequences of his/her actions but also the impact of these consequences on people, society, and the environment (Gemechu, 2022). Ethical sensitivity ensures that leaders adhere to the principles of empathy, fairness, transparency, and responsibility in their decision-making processes, and the holistic leader sees ethical sensitivity not only as a personal value but also as a building block that ensures the continuity of organizational culture (Zohar & Marshall, 2004).

In this context, mindfulness, balance, systemic thinking and ethical sensitivity stand out as the four fundamental characteristics of the holistic leader that enable him/her to be not only a "manager" but also a "transformative guide"; taken together, the leadership process is transformed from a technical function into a way of life based on mindfulness, meaning-making and ethical values.

6. Application Areas of Holistic Leadership in Businesses

Holistic leadership is not only a theoretical approach but also a management philosophy that can be applied in different organizational contexts. At the heart of this approach is the ability to treat organizations as living systems, to see individuals as meaningful parts of this system, and to guide all decision-making processes with the principles of ethics, awareness, and sustainability. In the business world, holistic leadership is a management approach that integrates the strategic goals of the organization with the employees' search for meaning. Today's businesses are faced with complex decisions in an environment of rapid change, digitalization, and global competition. In these conditions, the success of the leader depends not only on economic performance but also on human factors such as systemic awareness, ethical decision-making, and employee engagement (Zohar & Marshall, 2004).

Holistic leadership creates a cultural infrastructure that increases innovation and commitment in organizations, aligns employees' individual search for meaning with the organizational vision, and ensures that work becomes meaningful, not just done (Fry, 2008). In addition, holistic leadership is the mainstay of sustainability strategies in organizations and makes the leadership process responsibility-oriented instead of production-oriented by evaluating economic, environmental, and social impacts together in decision-making processes. In addition, they create a climate of psychological trust by establishing a balance in work environments with high levels of stress and burnout, and support organizational learning while increasing the level of commitment and productivity of employees (Senge, 1990).

Holistic leadership implies ethical awareness in decision-making processes, participatory management, and the development of sustainable public policies, while leaders are responsible not only for managerial efficiency but also for social justice, transparency, and accountability. Holistic leadership requires managers to have a vision that considers the balance between the individual, the organization, and the environment, while the leader evaluates decisions based on systemic impacts, not just short-term results (Orlov, 2003).

In addition, the implementation of holistic leadership in organizations involves both structural and cultural challenges. One of the most important challenges is that most organizations are still based on hierarchical, performance-oriented, and short-term thinking (Senge, 1990). Another challenge is the inability of leaders to measure and develop qualitative

skills such as inner awareness and ethical sensitivity, which can only be prevented through feedback and organizational learning processes (Evers, 1992). To summarize, holistic leadership is a transformation and integrity-based leadership model with a wide sphere of influence. However, for the sustainable implementation of this model, restructuring the organizational culture around the values of mindfulness, ethics, and systemic thinking emerges as an important element.

7. Conclusion and Assessment

Holistic leadership is one of the most holistic approaches emerging in the modern leadership literature. This model considers leadership as a multi-layered level of consciousness by bringing together the inner awareness of the individual, the ethical foundations of organizational processes, and the search for systemic balance. The theoretical framework discussed in the study shows that holistic leadership is not only a management style but also a philosophy of life and a paradigm of organizational transformation. Holistic leadership synthesizes key elements of contemporary approaches such as transformational, servant, authentic, and spiritual leadership and redefines leadership on the basis of meaning, ethics, and awareness. In this way, leadership focuses not only on producing results but also on creating a sustainable balance within the integrity of people, systems, and values.

Holistic leadership is based on four main dimensions of awareness, balance, ethical responsibility, and systemic integrity, and when these dimensions come together, leadership becomes a consciousness-oriented process, not just an action-oriented one. The power of holistic leaders does not come from their authority, but from their inner integrity and systemic awareness.

In this context, it can be said that holistic leadership is not only an individual level of consciousness but also a transformative component of organizational culture. The most distinctive aspect of holistic leadership is that it views the leadership process not as a power relationship but as a process of integration and meaning construction, integrating the leader's self-centered vision and the internal harmony of the organization with the external environment. In addition, for the holistic leadership model to be effective in practice, organizational culture must be restructured to support this approach, and leadership training and human resources policies should focus not only on technical skills but also on human competencies such as mindfulness, ethical sensitivity, and systems thinking.

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