

Communicating Leadership: Exploring the Interplay between Ontological Leadership and Effective Communication

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Abstract

The ontology of leadership and communication is rooted in the nature of human interaction, where meaning, influence, and relationships are socially constructed through dialogue. Leadership and communication coexist in an intrinsic relationship. This paper sought to examine the role of communication in the different leadership styles. It investigated how different leadership styles (transformational, transactional, servant leadership, etc.) utilize communication strategies to influence team dynamics and organizational culture. It was underpinned in the Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model. The study employed an exploratory research design to investigate the interplay between leadership and communication. The target population for this research consisted of scholarly documents drawn from a wide range of academic journals, peer-reviewed publications, and institutional reports. The reliance on secondary data ensured access to diverse perspectives, accumulated evidence, and established scholarly debates, thereby grounding the study in credible and authoritative sources. For data collection and analysis, the study conducted a comprehensive review of the selected literature, systematically identifying, organizing, and synthesizing relevant materials. The data was then analyzed using content analysis, which enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes, communication strategies, and leadership patterns. The study established that leadership is deeply ontological in nature, with communication serving as its constitutive process rather than a secondary tool. The study concluded that leadership cannot be meaningfully separated from communication; rather, communication constitutes the very essence of leadership. The study has also proposed contextually relevant strategies for enhancing leadership effectiveness through ontologically grounded communicative processes. Leaders should therefore adopt reflective practices such as mindful listening, open-ended inquiry, and dialogic engagement to ensure their communication conveys authenticity, respect, and attentiveness. A second strategy is the institutionalization of inclusive communicative practices that enable participatory meaning-making. Context-sensitive adaptation of communicative processes is also critical. Leaders must also be trained to recognize that their choice of words, metaphors, tone, and narrative frames are not neutral but actively construct the reality within which teams operate.

Keywords: Leadership, Communication, Leadership approaches, Leadership effectiveness, Ontological Leadership

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I. Introduction

Leadership and communication coexist in an intrinsic relationship. Since the beginning of recorded history, there is evidence that great leaders have also been great communicators. Ayiro (2021) in his book 'The art of Institutional leadership' observes;

'The truth is, leaders rise and fall based on the language they use to communicate. Indeed, whole visions and missions live or die based on the words the leader chooses to espouse that mission and vision.'

It is impossible to separate leadership and language. In any case, communication underlies all leadership functions. From the womb to the tomb, our claim of life and the exercise of living is that we communicate somehow. It is one of the most essential interpersonal skills that every individual should have. Which is why this paper sought to explore the possibility that while it is the case that communication is a critical component of leadership, the proposed ideal would be that the very being-of-a-leader would itself be communication, even without the noise of words. It is important this early to underscore the fact that the study looked at this as a mere conjecture.

The paper aimed at analyzing how communication can be used in the various styles of leadership. It examined the application of communication strategies to achieve organizational culture and team dynamics using various leadership styles (transformational, transactional, servant leadership, etc.). The success of this paper should be measured by how far it could assist in finding out how *the-way-of-being* of a leader could, in itself, be

transformational, transactional, authoritarian, or any other style for that matter. A further aim of this paper was to demonstrate that when 'being a leader', exercising leadership becomes one's natural self-expression. The kind of leadership referred to here is one in which the leader speaks 'being'; that is, the words that emanate from the mouth of the leader become existential reality that have colour, taste, smell and effect. It is herein, that leadership is at once also communication. Words that fall from that leader's mouth become concrete, whether this concreteness denotes some action taken, results delivered or whether it brings forth something; a being. Language matters (Ayiro, 2021), whether it be in spoken words, sign language or non-verbal cues picked by a good listener. To achieve the foregoing, the study relied on the ontological leadership model proposed by Werner et al. (2020) which employs phenomenological methodology in an attempt to create leaders who arise in situations requiring leadership without having to figure out anything, but rather whose leadership actions emerge as a natural self-expression. Through this model, leadership becomes their second nature, not a title or authority to make decisions or even position (Erhard et al., 2022).

1.1 Background

The ontology of leadership and communication is rooted in the nature of human interaction, where meaning, influence, and relationships are socially constructed through dialogue (Erbay, Javed, Nelson, & Benzerroug, 2024). Leadership cannot be understood in isolation from communication, because it is through language, symbols, and narratives that leaders articulate vision, build trust, and mobilize collective action. From this ontological lens, leadership is not merely a position or trait but a dynamic process that exists within communicative practices. Effective communication forms the foundation upon which authority is legitimized, decisions are negotiated, and organizational culture is shaped (Ali, Niu, & Rubel, 2024). Thus, exploring the interplay between leadership and communication is not only a matter of managerial technique but also a deeper inquiry into how reality within organizations is constituted through discourse and interaction.

Globally, leadership and communication have been recognized as inseparable pillars in driving organizational performance, cohesion, and adaptability in rapidly changing contexts (Marbun, Antarani, & Putri, 2023). In multicultural environments and international organizations, communication transcends linguistic exchange to include cultural intelligence, symbolic expression, and participatory dialogue. Studies from diverse contexts reveal that transformational, servant, and participatory leadership styles thrive when coupled with open, transparent, and adaptive communication strategies that resonate across cultural and social boundaries (Toseef, et al., 2022). Moreover, globalization and technological advancements have redefined the communicative landscape, compelling leaders to integrate digital platforms, intercultural competence, and inclusivity into their leadership practice.

From an African perspective, leadership and communication are embedded within communal traditions, cultural heritage, and social cohesion. African leadership thought, often framed by philosophies such as *Ubuntu*, emphasizes relationality, consensus, and collective responsibility, where communication serves as a bridge between leaders and communities (Demirdag, 2022). Yet, the continent also grapples with challenges of governance, organizational inefficiencies, and communication gaps that undermine trust and accountability. At the local level, particularly within organizational and community contexts, leaders face the pressing need to balance traditional norms of respect and hierarchy with modern demands for transparency, inclusivity, and participatory engagement (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Effective communication becomes a decisive factor in navigating this complexity, influencing not only organizational outcomes but also broader societal transformation. Within this context, exploring the interplay between leadership and communication provides vital insights for strengthening leadership effectiveness, nurturing trust, and enhancing sustainable development outcomes in local and national settings.

1.2 Problem Statement

Leadership, as an ontological phenomenon, exists not as a static attribute but as a lived process that takes form through communication. As observed by Miebaka, et al. (2021), 'The very reality of leadership is constituted through language, interaction, and meaning-making, yet much of the existing literature continues to privilege leadership as a set of traits, roles, or styles rather than as an emergent communicative practice.' This reductionist orientation overlooks the deeper essence of leadership as co-constructed in the everyday discourses between leaders and their followers (Miebaka, et al. 2021). As a result, studies often fragment leadership and communication into separate domains, treating communication merely as a supportive tool rather than as the very fabric through which leadership is enacted. This ontological gap limits our understanding of how leadership is lived and experienced within organizations and societies, leaving an incomplete picture of its relational and communicative foundations.

In practice, global leadership challenges reveal persistent misalignments between leadership intentions and communicative realities (Liu, Chambers, & Moore, 2023). While leaders may espouse transformational or participatory ideals, their communication strategies often fall short of fostering genuine dialogue, trust, and shared

meaning. In multicultural and technologically mediated environments, communication breakdowns exacerbate organizational dysfunction, erode trust, and diminish performance. Although a growing body of research explores leadership styles and organizational outcomes, there is limited inquiry into how communication practices mediate, shape, or even define leadership effectiveness in diverse contexts (Ramirez-Lozano, Peñaflor-Guerra, & Sanagustín-Fons, 2023). This gap becomes even more pronounced when considering non-Western settings, where cultural and contextual dimensions of communication are central to leadership practice but remain underexplored in mainstream scholarship.

From an African and local perspective, the problem is further compounded by the coexistence of traditional norms of authority and the contemporary demands for participatory and transparent leadership. While African philosophies such as Ubuntu emphasize relationality and consensus, organizational and political realities often reveal communication gaps marked by opacity, top-down directives, and limited engagement (Demirdag, 2022). Empirical studies in African contexts frequently focus on leadership and governance outcomes without sufficiently interrogating the communicative processes that either enable or constrain those outcomes. At the local level, this disconnect manifests in weakened trust, organizational inefficiencies, and resistance to change, underscoring the critical need for a deeper ontological inquiry into leadership as communicative practice (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Addressing this problem requires bridging theoretical, empirical, and practical gaps by systematically exploring how leadership is constituted, sustained, and transformed through communication in both global and local contexts.

1.3 Specific Objectives

- i). To examine how leadership is ontologically constituted through communication practices
- ii). To evaluate how different leadership approaches utilize communication strategies to influence team dynamics and organizational culture
- iii). To propose contextually relevant strategies for enhancing leadership effectiveness through ontologically grounded communicative processes

II. Literature Review

2.1 Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model

The Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model is principally associated with Erhard, Jensen, and Granger (2010). It builds on the philosophical traditions of ontology (the study of “being”) and phenomenology (the study of lived experience), positing that leadership is not simply what is done (behaviours, styles, tasks) or what one knows (competencies, theories) but rather the being-of-a-leader, and how leadership is experienced from the first-person vantage (Erhard, et al., 2010). Key premises include; that leadership emerges from “being” (one’s way of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and speaking) more than simply knowing about leadership; that there are ontological constraints, (hidden or default ways of seeing, feeling, and acting) that limit leaders’ presence and effectiveness; and, that language has constitutive power which shapes how situations “occur” for leaders and followers, thereby enabling or constraining leadership possibilities (Erhard, Jensen, Zaffron, & Echeverria, 2022). The model also assumes that through phenomenological methods such as reflection, bringing awareness to one’s ways of being, experiencing leadership “on the court” rather than merely observing from the stands.

Limitations of the theory include the fact that it is heavily qualitative, meaning that generalizability, measurement, and empirical evidence beyond self-report are less well developed. There is also potential ambiguity and difficulty in operationalizing “being” in research, and possible bias toward privileged leaders who have access to reflective practices such as coaching, thereby potentially neglecting systemic constraints or cultural variation (Erhard, et al., 2022).

The positive aspects of the ontological/phenomenological model include that it introduces depth and richness to the scholarship of leadership by introducing the lived, embodied experience of leadership and making visible the assumptions and mental maps that define the underpinning of leadership behaviour (White, Osorio, Eatman, & Weiss, 2023). According to Grigsby (2025), the participants cited report significant changes in their perception of themselves, their relationships with others, and the way they react to leadership situations. The leader’s effectiveness changes not only in behaviours, but the approach also brings forth a presence, a sense of clarity, a certain kind of listening and authenticity. Another strength is the model’s insistence that language is not merely peripheral but central. The way we speak, interpret, and frame situations shapes what leadership possibilities exist (Erhard, et al., 2022). This helps leadership scholars and practitioners see that interventions that focus only on technique, style, or management of followers may be superficial unless deeper ontological dimensions are addressed.

On the flip side, Grigsby (2025) notes that the model is somewhat under-specified in terms of how to measure the “being” aspects of leadership, how to compare different cultural or social contexts, and how much transformation persists over time. Empirical studies are often short-term, self-selected, and heavily reliant on subjective assessment. This raises questions about bias, about scalability, and about whether the model sufficiently

attends to structural or systemic constraints such as power relations, socio-cultural norms and resource limitations (White, et al., 2023). There is also critique that the prerequisites for people to benefit (e.g. openness, reflective capacity, and psychological safety) may not exist in many real organizational contexts, especially in cultures or systems that valorise hierarchical, instrumental, or directive leadership, which could limit the model's relevance or require adaptation.

This theory is directly applicable to this research since the model puts leadership as ontologically rooted in being and language. It is in tandem with the ontological nature of communication in the study, not as a tool or style, but as a constitutive contribution. That is, this model will be able to provide a conceptual avenue for studying the interplay of leadership and communication: how communicative practices can restrict as well as liberate what leadership can be. Secondly, the phenomenological dimension provides a methodological avenue; exploring lived experiences of leaders and followers. One is able to get to the experiences of communication, the co-construction of meaning, and the mental maps or ways of being that inhibit or support authentic communication. Thirdly, by considering the limitations noted in prior critiques, measurement, cultural context and systemic constraints, the study can help fill gaps, notably by applying the model in under-studied African/local settings, exploring how ontological constraints manifest in different cultural mental maps and how they affect communication and leadership practice in those localities. Thus, the Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model offers both theoretical richness and practical promise for the study, while pointing to areas (e.g. empirical operationalization and cultural adaptation) that the research can contribute toward.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Ontological Constitution of Leadership through Communication Practices

In a mixed-methods study of two leadership pedagogies at a South-western U.S. university," Adame, et al. (2021) compare a conventional epistemological leadership pedagogy with an ontological phenomenological-transformative one. They observed that students taught via the ontological approach where being-a-leaders is practiced - not merely taught - were deemed more "hireable" in leadership simulations than students in the conventional track. Key communication behaviours such as relational invitation, collaborator enlistment, forthright apologies, and request-making were identified as differentiators (Adame, et al., 2021). This study offers strong empirical support that leadership, when framed as a lived phenomenon, has measurable communicative manifestations, and impacts external evaluations. The study is however faulted for its limited scope due to the sample size. Furthermore, cultural and higher education setting in the US is not sufficiently probed. For this study however, this work is valuable as proof of the concept that communication practices can enact ontological leadership.

Leadership is a product of social construction and is achieved through a constant process of interaction, dialogue, implicit and explicit relational practices as well as influence, which occur both in a dyadic and collective environment. Ntakumba (2023) uses dialogic interviews and focus groups with a practice approach under a Relational Social Constructionist Leadership (RSCL), also referred to as onto-epistemology. His work is useful in demonstrating how ontological leadership is entangled in communication. In other words, it is not only what leaders speak of that matters. Rather, the patterns of relationships in which communication takes place, such as silence, consensual aligning, moral purpose, and shared meaning all converge in the exercise of leading (Ntakumba, 2023). The study is context-based and has rich qualitative data about the African organizations. Its major weakness is in the fact that it is largely qualitative, making it difficult to make robust generalizations. Furthermore, there is less quantification of how communication practices could forecast outcomes (performance, trust, cohesion etc.). Also, while rich, the study doesn't deeply chart how ontological leadership changes over time, and how communication practices differ in more constrained vs more open communicative environments (e.g. hierarchical vs flat organizations).

Tipurić (2022) argues that leaders' sense of awareness, commitment, integrity and authenticity are ontologically prior to what they know, have, or do; further, that language shapes these ontological pillars and directly impact how leaders talk, what point of view they adopt, what conversations they permit (or don't), etc. While this work is more prescriptive/conceptual than strictly empirical, there is some empirical evidence (through reflections and illustrative examples) that when leaders explicitly engage in ontologically grounded communication (e.g. authentic self-expression, reflective dialogue), outcomes such as ethical alignment, trust, and integrity in decisions improve (Tipurić, 2022). The drawback as relates to this study is that the empirical base is relatively limited and does not examine, for instance, how followers' interpretations co-construct the "being" of a leader.

From comparing these works, several patterns and gaps emerge. First, there is convergent evidence that the leader's "being" is not just internal or psychological, but enacted through communication practices, interactions, language, relational invitations, dialogue and authenticity. Both Adame, et al. (2021) and Ntakumba (2023) ground leadership being in communicative acts, not only in espoused values or stated styles. Carey (2020) explores how ICT, mobile technologies, and socio-technical systems shape how leadership is lived, and how

communication practices (digital, mobile, networked) become part of the ontological formation of leadership. Basque, Bencherki, and Kuhn (2022) recognize technology, regional culture, norms of leadership communication (e.g. values, morality, relationality). Their work raises hypotheses about how communication and leadership are intertwined.

2.2.2 Utilization of Communication Strategies by Different Leadership Approaches to Influence Team Dynamics and Organizational Culture.

Transformational Leadership Approach

Several empirical studies affirm that transformational leadership (TFL) employs specific communication strategies, such as inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration, to shape team dynamics and organizational culture. López-Lemus and De la Garza-Carranza (2024) studied micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Guanajuato, Mexico, using a quantitative, cross-sectional design and structural equation modelling. They found that transformational leadership significantly influences “challenging influence strategies” (rational, inspiring, and participatory). This shows how leaders’ communication strategy (inspiring, rational persuasion, and participation) quite directly shapes how influence is exercised within teams. Similarly, Nguyen and Le (2025) in Hanoi used 295 employees from 98 SMEs and structural equation models to show that transformational leadership has a positive effect on employees’ knowledge sharing behaviour. Communication here is central: through leaders’ behaviours that signal openness, intellectual stimulation, and support for sharing ideas.

Miebaka, Tamunomiebi, Oluchi and Sunnyibeh (2021) showed that transformational leadership (as a leadership development strategy) significantly predicts organizational culture, with communication mediating or helping to transmit leadership’s effect on culture. Jacobsen and Salomonsen (2021) used panel data analysis of 751 employees to examine how transformational leadership correlates with internal communication performance. Their findings confirm that when leaders share vision, use internal communication proactively (e.g., message consistency, clarity, openness), it improves internal communication performance. These studies collectively support the idea that communication strategies are both the mechanism and the channel through which transformational leadership shapes team dynamics (trust, knowledge sharing, relational coordination) and culture (shared values, innovation orientation, internal norms). They demonstrate that communication under transformational leadership is not just about what is communicated but how, through vision rhetoric, inclusive participative dialogue and rational persuasion among others.

Muzondiwa, Swarts, and Schultz (2022) found that organizational culture did not positively relate to transformational leadership and that perceived organizational effectiveness did not positively relate to transformational leadership. Culture mediated between perceived organizational effectiveness and transformational leadership but not in a straightforward way. This suggests that communication/leadership strategies under transformational leadership may not always effectively shape culture or effectiveness, possibly due to cultural mismatch, context, or other moderating factors. Turyahikayo, Mugizi, and Kasule (2024) compared transformational with transactional leadership and found that while transformational leadership is linked to better organizational communication, the degree varies, and sometimes transactional models (through rewards or clarity of tasks) contribute in ways transformational models do not fully capture. Some of the variability in communication outcomes is due to institutional constraints, often in form of bureaucracy or hierarchy. Fahy, McCartney, Fu, and Roche (2024) examined how relational resources such as trust and coordination impacted transformational leadership on school performance and work alienation during the COVID-19 crisis. They found strong mediation effects, but also noted that transformational leadership’s direct effect on outcomes is weaker in crisis contexts unless there is a strong communication component that is frequent, transparent, and relational.

The foregoing empirical findings lend credence to the thesis that leadership is not only about what leaders do or intend, but about how they communicate. While strategies, leadership styles, consistency and relationality remain central to how transformational leadership influences team dynamics and shapes organizational culture, there is sufficient evidence that the nature of communication (clarity, feedback, relational trust) all matter. The foregoing literature offers strong support that communication is a central strategy under transformational leadership to influence team dynamics and culture. It however also emerges that communication can be limited by context specificity, measurement breadth, cross-sectional design, and insufficient attention to interpretation and co-construction.

Transactional Leadership Approach

Several studies show that transactional leaders deploy communication strategies, (clarity of expectations, contingent rewards, feedback about performance, disciplined correction) to influence team dynamics and shape culture. Adriansyah, Setiawan, and Yuniarinto (2020) examined how perceived transactional leadership, notably contingent rewards and management-by-exception predict certain communication styles (preciseness, verbal

aggressiveness, emotionality, impression manipulation). They found that contingent reward and passive management-by-exception significantly predicted these styles. This shows that transactional leaders communicate through precise instructions, rewards and sometimes through corrective feedback. Khoshnaw and Karadas (2025) have shown that transactional leadership uses explicit communication of performance standards, monitoring, feedback, and rewards to foster agility, i.e. leaders communicate expectations and corrective feedback to maintain performance, which shapes norms around responsiveness in the organization.

In the study by Ali, Niu, and Rubel (2024), the transactional side is operationalized via communicated rewards and penalties. This communication of what is expected and what is rewarded has an impact on retention through engagement. These studies jointly prove that transactional leadership is not silent; it is the aggressive user of communication, and the effects of this communication are measurable in terms of such outcomes as knowledge sharing, agility, engagement and retention.

Further findings confirm the strong impact of transactional leadership communication. In a study by Khairy, Baquero, and Al-Romeedy (2023), the positive impact of transactional leadership on human capital was significant, but the direct influence on knowledge sharing was not significant ($p > .05$) in certain studies. This is an indication that transactional communication strategies are not possibly enough to prompt more discretionary behaviours such as sharing of knowledge unless there are other intervening factors. Ali, et al. (2024) concludes that transactional leadership is one of the factors that lead to retention through engagement. However, he also warns that excessive focus on rewards/punishments may negatively impact intrinsic motivation and may fail to develop organizational culture that will contribute to long-term loyalty. While transactional leadership is mostly accredited for helping attain the clarity of goals, the distribution of responsibilities and recognition, Dong (2023) notes that its impact on organizational creativity is not as significant as that of transformational leadership. Organizational creativity is more related to culture, norms, openness to risk, which transactional leadership may limit. According to Abawari, Debela, and Abegaz (2024) transactional leadership has been known to work in high uncertainty avoidance and high-power distance culture. This is because while the foregoing organizational culture approaches are associated with clarity and organizational structure, they are weaker in enabling culture change or innovation. Furthermore, communication strategies with transactional leadership have been found to reinforce the status quo more than contribute to the formation of emergent culture.

These criticisms also indicate that the positive communication of transactional leadership is more useful in more structured, outcome-focused and clear communication pathways, and less useful in the culture aspects like innovation, trust, psychological safety and creativity. Secondly, a lot of actions are premised on the subordinate perceptions, which can lead to biasness. This empirical literature is of great importance to this research because it demonstrates that transactional leadership communication efforts are a fact and have clear impacts on team and organizational culture, but they also have limited impacts in certain ways. Further implications of these findings are that transactional leadership belongs to the way the being of a leader is communicated and constituted, particularly through exchanges, promises, expectations and corrective feedback.

Authoritarian Leadership Approach

Empirical review shows that authoritarian leadership (AL) uses fairly direct, top-down communication strategies (e.g. commands, clear directives, and hierarchical control) and that these strategies often dampen creativity, reduce voice, but may increase discipline or compliance. Siddique, Siddique, and Siddique, (2020) found that AL's effect on negative outcomes is mediated via poor communication, relational quality (LMX) and weak perceived embeddedness in the organization. Zhang, Liu, and Du (2021) found that under certain cultural conditions, authoritarian leadership can positively influence perceived insider status and innovation behaviour, but only via communication mechanisms that make employees feel valued. Wang, Wu, He, and Gu (2022) also show that AL's negative communication effects manifesting as harsh or dictatorial may reduce creative self-efficacy. These effects can however be tempered when a leader also shows benevolence, and when employees are less sensitive to high power distance. These studies show a pattern. Authoritarian leadership tends to use communication in ways that are controlling, directive and less participative. Such communication tends to negatively influence relational constructs – notably trust, identification and creative self-efficacy – which then influence team dynamics and organizational culture.

Zhang, Liu & Du (2021) observe that in Chinese organizational culture, authoritarian leadership sometimes positively influence perceived insider status, which spurs innovation behaviour among employees. This signals that the communicative meaning of authoritarian commands or structure may be differently interpreted in high power distance, collectivist cultures. Liu, et al. (2024) distinguishes between discipline-focused authoritarian leadership and dominance-focused authoritarian leadership; the former (emphasizing rules, discipline) sometimes leads to positive task performance when mediated by psychological empowerment and when outcome expectancy is high. The latter emphasizes control and dominance, and tends to negatively affect innovative performance. According to Parlar, Türkoğlu, and Cansoy (2022), authoritarian leadership decreases affective commitment. It does this by reducing trust and increasing organizational silence. Here, the

communication strategy has strong negative effects, mediated through silence and distrust. These works show that not all authoritarian leadership communication is bad; rather, its influence heavily depends on the cultural context, the type of authoritarian communication, the perceptions of subordinates (insider status, dependence), and the mediating relational constructs especially trust and silence. Also, innovation and culture are sometimes treated as outcomes rather than ongoing communicative constructs that are co-produced by both leaders and followers.

Participatory Leadership Approach

Several recent studies substantiate that participative leadership, through communication strategies such as inclusive decision-making, frequent two-way dialogue, soliciting input, and open feedback, improves dimensions of team dynamics and culture. Mayasari, Suhara, Marlita, Widowati, and Damiyana (2024) found that organizational communication, participative leadership, and work motivation jointly explain ~60.2% of the variance in employee creativity. Communicative strategy characterised by strong open channels and employee involvement are central. Toufighi, et al. (2024) attest that participative leadership correlates positively with speaking-up and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, perceived leadership effectiveness mediates this relationship while cultural and linguistic diversity play role as moderators. Alarifi and Adam (2023) demonstrate that participative leadership and employee innovation behaviour together enhance organizational endurance during crisis. Participative leadership acts as a mediator between innovation behaviour and survival. Leaders who involve subordinates in decision making, discuss problems, seek inputs enable innovation and resilience. Nadia, KUSDARIANTO, and Wahida (2025) found that participative leadership positively correlates with performance, though organizational culture contributes more strongly to variance in performance than leadership alone. The communication through participative leadership is practical though appears to be more effective when intertwined in powerful culture. These papers indicate that communication styles of participative leadership (inquiring, involving, open dialogue) are more likely to create beneficial team dynamics such as employee voice, innovation, and collective problem solving.

However, the studies by Toufighi, et al. (2024) have demonstrated that the effects of the participative leadership on speaking up were moderated by the language proficiency and the regional differences. Some employees still expressed no views despite the participative structure due to language barrier or fear of repercussions, and the cultural factor explained the performance adequately. This implies that the efforts of leaders in regard to participation are limited whenever the culture does not favor open communication. Nadia, et al. (2025) suggests that while the participative leadership-innovation-endurance relationship was positive, the mediation was partial, and the study is limited to managerial perceptions. There is not enough literature however on the perspective of lower-level employees or even how they experience communication practices.

Several patterns emerge from the foregoing studies. First, participative leadership with communicative strategies tends to be effective in settings where motivation, innovation, or crisis resilience are needed. The study by Toufighi, et al. (2024) particularly connects with psychological safety and culture, showing that participation without safety or with language constraints yields weaker effects. Mayasari, et al. (2024) study links communication, motivation, culture and leadership in an integrated model, which is promising. But across studies, there is less inquiry into the ontological aspect of participatory leadership; that is, how participative leadership is lived, how communication practices constitute the identity of teams and the being of leaders and followers.

Servant Leadership Approach

Empirical evidence is also compelling that the leadership aspects of servant leadership through its communication practices positively influence organizational culture and aspects of team dynamics that are performance-based, including voice behaviour, psychological safety, engagement, and performance. Thelen (2021) revealed that servant leadership advances communication satisfaction (such as supervisory communication and feedback) that cause the improvement of employee-organization relationships and consequently higher employee advocacy. This is a clear mechanism: the high level of communication demonstrated by servant leaders, results in more positive relational ties and advocacy. Song, Tian, and Kwan (2022) demonstrate that servant leadership facilitates the promotion of both promotive voice and prohibitive voice, which are mediated by job engagement, and the strength of these relationships is moderated by proactive personality. This implies that servant leader communication promotes trust and psychological safety dynamics, which allows team members to engage in culture formation. Baety and Rojuaniah (2022), revealed that servant leadership and organizational culture are positively correlated with organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), and that servant leadership indirectly influences an innovative work behaviour through the mediation of OCB. In this case, communicative behaviour implied can be increasing other people by encouraging, sustaining voluntary extra-role behaviour, promoting cultural values that appreciate helping, kindness, and recognition.

Hassan, Yoon, and Dedahanov (2025) focused directly on communication practices: how supervisors explicitly communicate messages that signal servant-leadership traits (such as listening, caring, stewardship), and found these messages correlate positively with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and lower turnover

intentions. This is perhaps one of the more directly relevant pieces in terms of communication strategy itself (not just outcomes), showing empirical linkage between specific communicative acts/relational communication and culture/dynamics. These studies are valuable as they not only support the assumption that servant leadership makes use of communication strategies in shaping culture and team behaviour, but also identify some mediating mechanisms (communication satisfaction, job engagement, voice) and moderators (proactive personality).

Naa, Jasfar, Warsindah, & Kristaung (2022) found that servant leadership positively influences job-related outcomes including psychological empowerment, commitment, OCB and job satisfaction, but organizational culture only significantly moderates some relationships (between servant leadership, OCB, and job satisfaction), not all. Mikhriani and Lada (2025) found that while servant leadership and organizational culture both positively affect job satisfaction, and job satisfaction leads to engagement and productivity, the hypothesis that engagement affects productivity was not supported empirically. This indicates that the chain of effects via communication-driven satisfaction to engagement to performance is not always intact; some of the communicative practices may induce satisfaction, but that doesn't always translate to elevated engagement or productivity depending on other constraints (work load, structural organization, institutional culture, norms).

III. Methodology

The study employed an exploratory research design to investigate the interplay between leadership and communication. This design was considered appropriate since the subject is complex and diverse, requiring the generation of perspectives and deeper understanding rather than the testing of predetermined hypotheses. The use of an exploratory methodology, allowed the research to reveal patterns, themes and meanings in the leadership communication practices in various settings. The research population was represented by academic materials that were retrieved in the extensive collection of academic journals, peer-reviewed publications, and institutional reports. These were good sources of secondary data which represents both theoretical contributions and empirical research in the domain of leadership and communication. The dependency on secondary data made the access to different points of view, as well as collected facts and the existing scholarly discussion possible, thus ensuring the basis of the study on credible and authoritative sources. To collect and analyze data, the study undertook an intensive literature search, whereby the appropriate materials were located, systematized and synthesized. Content analysis was further used in the analysis of the data and allowed the researcher to determine repeat themes, communication techniques, and leadership styles. Coding and categorization enabled the study to attain meaningful interpretations to bridge the gap between the existing knowledge with the research objectives and to point out the gaps in knowledge that were to be addressed in the current inquiry.

IV. Findings and Discussion

The review of literature demonstrates that leadership is deeply ontological in nature, with communication serving as its constitutive process rather than a secondary tool. Evidence from Erhard, Jensen, and Granger's Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model illustrates that leadership emerges from "being" and is made manifest through language, commitments, and relational practices. This premise is supported by empirical studies such as Adame, et al. (2021), Ntakumba (2023), and López-Lemus and De la Garza-Carranza (2024), which confirm that leadership is ontologically enacted through communicative acts including authentic dialogue, sense-making, and vision-sharing. Across leadership styles (transformational, transactional, authoritarian, participatory, and servant), communication strategies emerge as the medium through which leaders constitute their presence and influence. Transformational leaders, for instance, utilize inspiring and inclusive narratives; servant leaders emphasize empathetic listening and relational care; while authoritarian leaders rely on directive and hierarchical communication to establish order. Despite their differences, these styles converge on the insight that the being-of-a-leader is inseparable from the communication practices that bring it forth in organizational life.

The findings highlight important convergences and divergences in existing research when viewed through the lens of the Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model (Erhard et al., 2010). This model argues that leadership is not primarily a set of competencies or traits but rather an ontological state of being that comes into existence through language and interaction. Empirical studies on transformational leadership (Nguyen & Le, 2025; López-Lemus & De la Garza-Carranza, 2024) support this by showing that leaders' ability to articulate compelling visions and foster dialogic exchanges enhances trust, team cohesion, and organizational culture. Similarly, servant and participatory leadership findings (Thelen, 2021; Mayasari, et al., 2024) affirm that practices such as listening, inclusion, and mutual dialogue embody leadership as a lived experience, thus resonating strongly with the ontological model. In contrast, research on transactional leadership (Khairy, et al., 2023; Dong, 2023) reveals that communication strategies focused on rules, monitoring, and rewards may structure team performance but do not necessarily alter the being of leaders or followers. They reinforce compliance rather than co-create shared identity. Authoritarian leadership findings (Zhang, Liu, & Du, 2021) further complicate the ontological framing, as directive communication can both suppress voice in low-power-distance settings and strengthen collective purpose in contexts where hierarchy is ontologically normalized. Positioning these findings

ontologically, the evidence suggests that communication is not merely instrumental but constitutive. It shapes what it means to be a leader and what it means to be led.

V. Conclusion

The study concludes that leadership cannot be meaningfully separated from communication; rather, communication constitutes the very essence of leadership. Drawing on the Ontological/Phenomenological Leadership Model, the findings reveal that leadership is not simply a set of traits or behaviours but a mode of being that comes into existence through language, dialogue, and relational practices. Transformational, transactional, authoritarian, participatory, and servant leadership styles may appear distinct in form, yet they all converge on one truth: leadership is enacted through communicative strategies that shape how leaders are perceived, how followers respond, and how organizational culture and team dynamics evolve. Without communication, leadership remains abstract and unrealized. With communication, it becomes embodied, enacted, and impactful.

The study also finds that communication strategies vary in their ontological depth and influence. Transformational and servant leadership approaches embody the ontological essence of leadership most strongly, as they rely on authentic dialogue, vision-sharing, empathy, and relational listening to co-create meaning and foster trust. Participatory leadership similarly demonstrates the power of inclusive communication to strengthen psychological safety and team innovation. In contrast, transactional and authoritarian leadership rely more on directive and rule-based communication, which produce compliance and short-term results but often fall short of reshaping organizational culture or deepening team identity. These findings suggest that leadership approaches rooted in authentic, relational, and inclusive communication strategies are more effective in sustaining long-term cultural transformation, while directive approaches limit leadership's ontological potential.

The study concludes that the ontology of leadership communication is significantly shaped by context. Global research shows broad support for the role of communication in constituting leadership, but African and local perspectives remain underrepresented. Indigenous African practices of dialogue, communal storytelling, and relational authority point to alternative ontologies of leadership that are both culturally specific and globally relevant. Moreover, in contemporary contexts where digital platforms mediate communication, the very being of leaders is reconstituted in virtual interactions, demanding new models of presence, authenticity, and trust-building. The study therefore affirms that leadership is ontologically grounded in communication, but it also emphasizes the need for culturally grounded, context-sensitive, and technologically adaptive approaches to understanding and practicing leadership.

VI. Recommendations

The intentional development of authentic presence during communication is one of the strategies that can be applied to increase the effectiveness of leadership because of its ontological foundation. The results of this research confirm that leadership does not just relate to the transmission of information but concerning the existence of conversation, the way leaders appear, listen, and act. Reflective practices that leaders should embrace in order to make their communication sound authentic, respectful and attentive include mindful listening, open-ended inquiry, and dialogic engagement. Leaders can make communication a focus of presence, rather than performance, in order to establish space of trust with their followers to ensure that they feel appreciated, and this enhances the cohesion of the team, and also follows the ontological assumption that language shapes leadership experience.

A second strategy is the institutionalization of the inclusive communicative practices that facilitate the participatory meaning-making. Leaders can explicitly incorporate such mechanisms in situational contexts where hierarchical tradition limits openness, i. e. the structured dialogue forums, feedbacks, and participation in decision-making that both decentralize voice and activate collective agency. To increase psychological safety, enhance creativity and transform organizational culture to collaboration and collective accountability, leaders ought to make it possible that different views are heard and embraced. This is an ontological assertion that leadership is manifested in the relationship patterns of speaking, listening and responding as opposed to unilateral orders.

It is also important that communicative processes be context-sensitive. Cultural and institutional realities cannot be separated from leadership communication. Culturally resonant constitutions of leadership through language, such as storytelling, group discussion, oral traditions are used in African contexts. Adapting these native communicative practices to a contemporary organizational context will allow the leaders to reinforce cultural alignment and legitimacy as well as to make sure that ontological leadership is not reduced to western paradigms. Likewise, in online and mixed-digital space, leaders may also employ technology to maintain presence and authenticity through interactive interaction, transparent, and relational online communication.

In order to improve the effectiveness of leadership, the continuity of reflexivity about language is needed as a constituent of leadership communication. Leaders have to be taught that the words, metaphors, tone, and frames they use in telling their stories are not neutral and constitute the reality into which the teams are being led.

Leaders may be trained to break default communicative patterns that promote hierarchy, silence or fear, and develop instead language that alters possibility, shared purpose and empowerment through leadership development programs based on ontological principles. This kind of reflexivity ensures that communication is not a management instrument but a transformational process of co-construction of meaning and culture.

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