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The Contextual Misalignment Effect: A Neurobiological and Preventative Framework for Understanding Leadership Ineffectiveness

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Abstract

Leadership failure is often judged through surface level outcomes-missed targets, declining morale, or unmet expectations-yet such evaluations obscure the contextual forces that shape leader behavior and follower perception. This article argues that ineffective leadership is best understood as a context bound phenomenon, emerging not from inherent deficiency but from misalignment between leader behavior and situational demands. Drawing on contingency and situational leadership theories, the article critiques universalistic models that rely on static traits or outcome-based criteria and demonstrates how organizational culture, resource constraints, ethical ambiguity, and follower expectations complicate assessments of leadership effectiveness. Integrating insights from neuroscience and resilience theory, the article clarifies how chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, and neurobiological strain influence judgment, impulse control, and relational behavior. These mechanisms help explain why ineffective patterns persist even when leaders possess contextual awareness. Resilience, conceptualized ecologically, further reveals how shifting risk and protective factors shape both leader and follower responses to organizational pressures, underscoring the need for environments that support psychological safety, clarity, and adaptive capacity. Extending this contextual approach, the article advances a preventative pedagogical model grounded in stress physiology, burnout research, and reflexive accounts. This model equips emerging leaders to recognize early indicators of misalignment-emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, moral fatigue, and relational withdrawal-before harm becomes visible or irreversible. The article also introduces a developmental perspective on leadership-related harm, building on a model presented at a recent professional conference and elaborated in a forthcoming manuscript on what the author terms the *continuum of harm*. By foregrounding the embodied and relational dimensions of leadership, the article reconceptualizes grey leadership as a physiological and lived experience rather than a purely behavioral or ethical category. Together, these contributions advance a more precise, equitable, and context sensitive framework for evaluating leadership effectiveness and for teaching leadership responsibility in complex organizational environments. This integrated approach positions leadership development as a preventative practice, aligning scholarly theory with the lived realities of modern organizational life.

Introduction

Leadership is often judged in the quietest moments-when pressure intensifies, resources diminish, and decisions must be rendered in the absence of complete information. From a distance, such moments are easily labeled as failures: missed targets, declining morale, or outcomes that fall short of expectations. Yet leadership rarely unfolds within ideal or uncomplicated conditions. It is continually shaped by constraints, cultural forces, human dynamics, and the unpredictable rhythm of events that no universal model can fully anticipate. What may appear to be ineffective

leadership from an external vantage point may, within its actual context, represent the most viable path to preserving stability, safeguarding morale, or ensuring long term organizational viability and resilience. Effective leadership often resides not in visible triumphs, but in the disciplined navigation of complexity, where the “right” decision is simply the one that prevents greater harm and sustains the possibility of future progress. This raises a set of foundational questions: How should leadership be evaluated when conditions are imperfect? What do we call “failure” when



leaders are navigating constraints rather than choices? And can universalistic models truly capture the lived realities of leadership under pressure? This article argues that leadership effectiveness, and leadership harm, cannot be meaningfully evaluated without considering context.

To establish this claim, limitations of universalistic models are first examined. Traditional frameworks often define ineffectiveness through static traits or outcome-based criteria. Although these models offer conceptual clarity, they overlook the situational, relational, and cultural forces that shape leader behavior and follower perceptions. A contextual perspective, aligned with contingency theory, situational leadership theory, and contemporary relational approaches, provides a more equitable and analytically precise foundation for evaluating leadership under pressure. From this standpoint, ineffective leadership is best understood as a context bound phenomenon rather than a universally fixed category. Leadership emerges as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between leaders, followers, and environmental demands-not merely by personal attributes.

To advance this argument, the article integrates theoretical foundations for contextual evaluation with insights from neuroscience and resilience research. Neuroscientific evidence demonstrates how chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, and impaired executive functioning shape leader judgment and relational behavior, helping explain why ineffective patterns persist even when leaders possess contextual awareness. Resilience theory further reveals how shifting risk and protective factors influence both leader and follower responses to organizational pressures, signaling the need for environments that support psychological safety, clarity, and adaptive capacity. By weaving these theoretical and biological foundations together, ineffective leadership is reframed not as an inherent deficiency but as a misalignment between leader behavior and environmental demands. This perspective elucidates how organizational culture, resource limitations, ethical ambiguity, and follower expectations shape evaluations of leadership effectiveness-and why the boundary between ineffective and unethical leadership is often blurred in practice. In doing so, the article challenges universalistic models, advances a relational and context-sensitive understanding of leadership, and clarifies the conceptual overlap between ineffective and unethical leadership.

Finally, the article then considers implications for leadership development grounded in stress physiology, burnout research, neuroleadership, and reflexive practice. These insights suggest that preventative, context sensitive education can help emerging leaders recognize early indicators of misalignment before harm becomes visible. This approach advances a more comprehensive understanding of leadership responsibility-one that reflects the lived realities of modern organizational life and prepares leaders to navigate complexity with clarity, compassion, and resilience. Taken together, these insights establish the need for a more context sensitive and biologically informed understanding of leadership effectiveness-one that accounts for complexity, variability, and the

lived realities of organizational life. To situate this argument within existing scholarship, the next section examines how ineffective leadership has traditionally been defined and how it fits within the broader construct of bad leadership. By tracing the limitations of universalistic models and clarifying the conceptual boundaries between ineffective and unethical leadership, this foundation provides the analytical footing necessary for the contextual reframing advanced throughout the article.

Framing Ineffective Leadership Within the Broader Construct of Bad Leadership

Ineffective leadership is often portrayed as a straightforward form of failure, typically attributed to leaders who do not achieve expected outcomes or who preside over declining follower satisfaction. While this universalistic framing offers conceptual simplicity, it risks misattributing organizational shortcomings to individual leaders and obscuring the relational, systemic, and situational dimensions of leadership. This article, therefore, positions ineffective leadership as a distinct yet often overlapping category within the broader construct of bad leadership, drawing on *Kellerman's et al.*, (2004) [26] typology, which differentiates between unethical leadership, ineffective leadership, and leadership that is both unethical and ineffective. A contextual approach provides an equitable, precise, and analytically robust framework for understanding leadership performance. Even with its conceptual utility, the boundary between ineffective and unethical leadership remains underdeveloped. Although Kellerman's typology distinguishes ineffective leadership from unethical leadership, recent scholarship highlights the fluidity between these categories and the need for clearer theoretical delineation [20,35,63]. Ethical blind spots further complicate classification, as leaders may unintentionally cause harm while believing they are acting appropriately [6]. These ambiguities strengthen the importance of evaluating leadership within its situational, relational, and ethical context rather than relying on universal criteria or static behavioral taxonomies.

Neuroscientific research deepens this complexity. A compelling explanation for why ineffective and unethical leadership frequently overlap is offered by Hannah et al. [19].

Leaders with lower self-complexity are more susceptible to stress driven cognitive narrowing, which can produce both poor judgment (ineffective leadership) and ethical blind spots (unethical leadership). Under pressure, these leaders may misread contextual cues, discount follower feedback, or default to defensive decision patterns that escalate harm. This neurological vulnerability helps explain Kellerman's third category-leaders who are both ineffective and unethical-and illustrates why these dimensions often intersect in practice. Leadership emergence itself extends beyond conventional categories of "effective" and "ineffective," reflecting relational, cultural, and situational dynamics that resist simplistic measurement [48]. A contextual framework therefore advances both scholarly precision and practical fairness by situating leadership behavior within the environments that shape it. This perspective

aligns with contemporary efforts to develop contextually grounded leadership evaluation that accounts for complexity, variability, and the lived realities of organizational life.

Understanding bad leadership requires more than categorizing harmful behaviors; it demands examining the assumptions embedded in the frameworks used to evaluate them. While typologies such as Kellerman’s help distinguish ineffective, unethical, and overlapping forms of bad leadership, they still rely on underlying evaluative models that presume stable conditions, clear outcomes, and linear causality. These assumptions become problematic when leadership unfolds within environments marked by ambiguity, constraint, and relational complexity. To interrogate these assumptions, the next section turns to the limitations of universalistic models that have historically shaped leadership evaluation. These models often define ineffectiveness through static traits or outcome-based criteria, obscuring the contextual, cultural, and situational forces that influence leader behavior and follower perceptions. By examining where these universalistic approaches fall short, we can better understand why conventional definitions of ineffective leadership fail to capture the realities of leadership under pressure-and why a contextual reframing is necessary.

Limitations of Universalistic Models

Universalistic definitions of ineffective leadership typically characterize it as poor outcomes, diminished follower satisfaction, or failure to meet organizational goals, applied uniformly across settings. Scholars often operationalize ineffective leadership through fixed traits or generalizable behavioral patterns. *Modise et al.*, (2024) [36], for example, defined ineffective leaders as individuals who lack the abilities or act in ways incompatible with effective leadership. Similarly, *Thompson et al.*, (2024) [63] and others associate ineffective leadership with inadequate, passive, or avoidant behaviors [8,17,27,62]. Earlier research likewise links

ineffective leadership to demoralization, occupational stress, and reduced well-being [1,4,23]. Notwithstanding their prevalence, universalistic models rest on the assumption that leadership effectiveness can be evaluated through fixed, generalizable criteria. This assumption oversimplifies a complex, relational phenomenon. Leaders are often labeled ineffective for failing to increase productivity or morale without accounting for contextual constraints such as resource scarcity, toxic culture, conflicting directives, or structural barriers [23,32]. Similarly, performance systems may classify leaders as ineffective for failing to meet quarterly targets even when external forces-such as global supply chain disruptions-render such goals unattainable [38]. By focusing narrowly on individual shortcomings, universalistic approaches risk misattributing organizational failure to leaders while obscuring the broader systemic, cultural, and situational forces that shape leadership behavior. This misclassification can unfairly castigate leaders operating in volatile or under resourced environments, distort performance evaluations, and discourage capable leaders from remaining in challenging roles. These limitations highlight the need for a more contextually grounded framework-one that evaluates leadership effectiveness based on the alignment, or misalignment, between leader behavior and situational demands.

Comparing Universalistic and Contextual Approaches to Ineffective Leadership

To clarify the conceptual shift from universalistic to contextual evaluation, Table 1 contrasts the assumptions, strengths, and limitations of each approach. Universalistic models offer simplicity and broad applicability but risk misclassification by ignoring situational, cultural, and systemic factors. In contrast, a contextual approach evaluates leadership effectiveness based on the alignment-or misalignment-between leader behavior and environmental demands, integrating ethical intent, structural constraints, and stakeholder perspectives (Table 1).

Table: 1 Universalistic vs. Contextual Approaches to Defining Ineffective Leadership.

Dimension	Universalistic Approach	Contextual Approach
Definition	Ineffective leadership is defined by poor outcomes, low satisfaction, or failure to meet objectives, regardless of setting.	Ineffective leadership is defined by a persistent misalignment between leader behavior and the specific demands, constraints, and norms of the context.
Evaluation Criteria	Fixed traits, behaviors, or performance indicators applied across contexts.	Flexible, situational criteria that adapt to environmental, cultural, and organizational factors.
Strengths	Simple, easy to apply, allows broad comparisons across settings.	Accounts for cultural differences, systemic constraints, and leader-context fit.
Limitations	Risks of misclassifying leaders by ignoring context; may unfairly blame individuals for systemic failures.	More complex to apply; requires deeper situational analysis and richer data.
View of Effectiveness	Universal benchmarks of success (e.g., productivity, profitability, follower satisfaction).	Effectiveness varies depending on situational goals (e.g., stability, recovery, innovation).
Treatment of Ethics	Ethics is often treated separately from effectiveness.	Ethical intent and impact are integrated into the assessment of effectiveness.
Illustrative Example	A leader is labeled “ineffective” for failing to improve productivity despite operating in a severely under-resourced department. Low team productivity → “ineffective.”	The same leader is evaluated relative to resource constraints, recognizing that maintaining morale under scarcity may be an effective outcome. Low productivity in an under-resourced team → maintaining morale may be an effective outcome.

The preceding section contrasted universalistic and contextual definitions of ineffective leadership, demonstrating why fixed, one size fits all criteria are insufficient for evaluating leadership performance. Universalistic models offer conceptual simplicity but overlook the relational, situational, systemic, and ethical dimensions that shape how leadership is enacted and experienced. A contextual perspective instead recognizes ineffective leadership as a context bound phenomenon, integrating ethical intent, structural constraints, and stakeholder interpretations. This framework provides greater fairness, accuracy, and relevance in both research and practice, moving leadership scholarship beyond oversimplified taxonomies toward a more precise and equitable understanding of leadership effectiveness. Building on this contrast, the following section outlines the contextual approach in detail and establishes the premises that support this framework, advancing the case for contextually grounded leadership evaluation.

Contextual Leadership: A Dynamic, Relational Process

Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes leadership not as a static set of traits but as a dynamic process of influence toward a shared goal [16,66,67]. This orientation highlights why universalistic definitions fall short: leadership behaviors do not carry fixed meanings. Their effectiveness depends on situational demands. Rigidity may impede innovation in collaborative environments yet provide necessary stability during crises. Insularity may hinder long-term strategy yet protect a team facing immediate external threats. As *Shah et al.*, (2021) [54] observed, organizations under extreme conditions may either exacerbate risks or adapt in ways that promote thriving-underscoring the centrality of context in shaping leadership outcomes. These theoretical insights become clearer when examining how leadership unfolds in practice. A contextual approach positions leadership effectiveness within the dynamic interaction of leaders, followers, and the environment. Rather than treating leadership as a fixed attribute of a positional role, this perspective views leadership as an ongoing process shaped by situational demands, resource availability, cultural norms, and organizational development. Context determines which behaviors are functional or counterproductive. A start-up CEO who prioritizes long-term product development over short-term profitability may appear ineffective when judged by quarterly metrics, even though such decisions are essential for competitive survival. In crisis contexts, maintaining team morale during unavoidable losses may represent a more meaningful indicator of leadership effectiveness than traditional performance outcomes. These examples illustrate that leadership cannot be disentangled from the environment in which it unfolds.

Contextual Leadership: A More Accurate Lens for Understanding Ineffectiveness

A contextual approach offers a more precise and equitable foundation for evaluating leadership effectiveness than universalistic, one-size-fits-all models where certain traits or

behaviors are universally beneficial. Instead of treating leadership effectiveness as a fixed attribute, contextual leadership emphasizes the alignment between leader behavior and situational demands. This perspective is corroborated by *Oshame and Maureen's et al.*, (2023) [43] analysis of major leadership theories, which demonstrates that no single model-transformational, transactional, servant, or situational-can fully account for the complexity of modern organizational environments. Each theory provides valuable insights but becomes limited when applied rigidly across diverse contexts. The authors argued [43] that contemporary leadership challenges, including globalization, rapid technological change, and shifting workforce expectations, require leaders to draw flexibly from multiple approaches. Effective leadership, therefore, depends less on fixed personal attributes and more on a leader's capacity to interpret contextual cues, adapt their style, and respond to evolving organizational pressures. This aligns with the broader argument advanced in this manuscript: ineffective leadership is best understood as a misalignment between leader behavior and environmental demands, not as an inherent deficiency. A contextual perspective also clarifies why ineffective and unethical leadership often appear intertwined. When leaders face conflicting expectations, resource constraints, or ambiguous ethical norms, their actions may be judged harshly even when they are navigating structural barriers rather than acting with ill intent. Contextual leadership helps distinguish between genuine misconduct and situational strain, offering a more distinct and fair assessment of leader performance. By moving beyond one-size-fits-all models, a contextual approach offers greater fairness, accuracy, and relevance for both scholarship and practice. It aligns with the broader argument that ineffective leadership is best understood as a context-bound phenomenon, shaped by relational dynamics, environmental pressures, and stakeholder expectations. Furthermore, this aligns with the broader argument advanced in this contribution: leadership ineffectiveness emerges not from static personal flaws but from the evolving interplay between leaders and the environments in which they operate.

Defining Ineffective Leadership Through Contextual Misalignment

Through a contextual lens, ineffective leadership can be defined as a persistent misalignment between leader behavior and the functional, structural, relational, cultural, or ethical demands of a specific environment. This definition rejects universalistic assumptions that leadership effectiveness can be evaluated through fixed traits or outcome-based criteria. Instead, it emphasizes that leadership performance is shaped by the dynamic interaction of leaders, followers, and situational conditions. A leader who thrives in a collaborative, innovation driven environment may struggle in a hierarchical or bureaucratic organization-not because of incompetence, but because the norms, pressures, and expectations of the context differ significantly [13,39]. Universalistic definitions may acknowledge subtle variation, yet they continue to generalize leadership effectiveness across settings. This ambiguity is validated

by the absence of a precise, discipline wide definition of leadership, which allows extraneous connotations to shape how the construct is interpreted [71]. A contextual definition clarifies these ambiguities by grounding leadership effectiveness in environmental realities. Misalignment may arise from shifting organizational climates, evolving follower needs, cultural expectations, or systemic constraints such as resource scarcity or role ambiguity. It may also emerge from neurobiological strain, relational erosion, or resilience deficits-mechanisms explored in earlier sections. Importantly, contextual misalignment distinguishes between ineffective leadership and unethical leadership: while both may produce harm, ineffective leadership often stems from situational pressures rather than malicious intent.

This definition enhances scholarly precision and practical fairness by avoiding biased evaluations that attribute systemic failures solely to individual leaders. At the same time, it preserves accountability by recognizing that leaders must still respond adaptively to contextual demands. Ineffective leadership, therefore, is not an inherent deficiency but a dynamic process shaped by the evolving interplay between leaders and the environments in which they operate. This contextual definition provides the foundation for the sections that follow, which examine how organizations, educators, and leaders can better recognize early indicators of misalignment and cultivate environments that support ethical, adaptive, and resilient leadership.

Premises Fundamental to a Contextual Definition

A contextual definition of ineffective leadership rests on several foundational premises, each capturing dimensions of complexity that universalistic models overlook. At its core, this perspective assumes relational and situational variability: leaders may excel in one environment yet struggle in another because norms, expectations, and pressures differ across settings [13,39]. It also recognizes the social construction of effectiveness, whereby stakeholders interpret leadership performance through cultural values, institutional norms, and collective priorities [40]. What counts as “effective” leadership is therefore inseparable from the meanings assigned by followers and the broader organizational culture. Contextual evaluation further requires attention to systemic constraints-structural barriers, resource scarcity, and institutional rules that shape what leaders can realistically accomplish [12]. It also incorporates ethical intent and interpretation, acknowledging that judgments of ineffectiveness often hinge on perceived motives and contextually shaped ethical standards rather than on behavior alone.

To capture the fuller complexity of leadership in practice, this framework extends beyond traditional premises to include several additional considerations. Temporal dynamics highlight that leadership effectiveness shifts as organizational conditions evolve. Follower capacity and readiness influence how leader behaviors are received and interpreted. Organizational history and memory shape expectations and color perceptions of current leadership

actions. Cultural and identity dynamics affect evaluations of leader behavior, particularly in diverse or historically marginalized groups. Environmental volatility alters what constitutes effective leadership as conditions change rapidly. Finally, role ambiguity and structural contradictions can create the appearance of ineffectiveness even when leaders act reasonably within their constraints. Together, these extended premises strengthen a central argument: ineffective leadership cannot be meaningfully assessed without examining the environmental conditions in which it occurs. A contextual definition acknowledges that leadership effectiveness emerges from the dynamic interaction of leaders, followers, and situational demands, offering a more precise and equitable lens for evaluating leadership performance.

What a Contextual Approach Is

A contextual approach evaluates leadership effectiveness by examining the fit-or misfit-between leader behaviors and situational demands. It recognizes that effectiveness is shaped by functional requirements, relational dynamics, ethical expectations, and environmental pressures. Rather than relying on static traits or universal competencies, a contextual framework incorporates structural constraints, cultural norms, and stakeholder expectations to determine whether a leader's actions align with what the situation requires. This approach also distinguishes between individual deficiencies and systemic misalignment, acknowledging that leaders often operate within conditions that shape, limit, or distort their behavioral options.

What a Contextual Approach Is Not

A contextual approach is not a universal checklist of competencies applied across all settings. It does not excuse harmful or unethical behavior; context explains but does not justify misconduct. Nor is it purely subjective. While it recognizes that follower perception influences evaluations of leadership, it also integrates measurable situational factors such as resource availability, organizational structure, role clarity, and environmental volatility. In this way, contextual evaluation balances interpretive rigor with empirical grounding.

Integrative Definition

For this article, ineffective leadership is defined as a persistent misalignment between leader behavior and the demands of a specific context. This definition resists the oversimplification of universal models by recognizing leadership performance as fluid, relational, and shaped by both environmental conditions and situational demands. A contextually grounded framework enhances scholarly precision and practical fairness by avoiding biased evaluations that attribute systemic failures to individual leaders while still holding leaders accountable for their actions within those systems. This contextual definition rests on a broader theoretical understanding of leadership as a dynamic, relational process shaped by the interaction of leaders, followers, and the environments in which they operate. It highlights the value of

contextually grounded leadership evaluation and prepares the groundwork for examining how neuroscience, resilience, and organizational dynamics illuminate the mechanisms through which leadership effectiveness-and leadership harm-emerge. Building on this foundation, a contextual perspective requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining why leadership effectiveness varies across settings and why misalignment arises under specific environmental pressures. The following section outlines the theoretical foundations that support contextual evaluation and clarify its relevance for contemporary organizational life.

Theoretical Foundations for Contextual Evaluation

A contextual approach aligns with established leadership theories that reject universal, one-size-fits-all definitions of effectiveness. Contingency theory *Fiedler et al., 1967* [13] and situational leadership theory [21] both emphasize fit-the alignment between leader behavior, follower readiness, and situational demands-as the central determinant of effectiveness. These frameworks demonstrate that leadership cannot be meaningfully evaluated apart from the conditions in which it occurs. This perspective also addresses a common critique: leaders may still be ineffective even when contextual constraints are acknowledged. While leaders who consistently fail to adapt within constraints may indeed be ineffective, evaluating all leaders against fixed, context-free criteria is misleading. A contextual approach instead recognizes ineffective leadership as a misalignment between situational requirements and leader responses, reinforcing the need to evaluate leadership within its lived environment rather than through abstract benchmarks. Illustrative cases make this clear. A leader who maintains staff stability during a crisis may be labeled ineffective for failing to increase production, even though stability was the most appropriate and achievable outcome under the circumstances. Such examples reveal how universalistic models obscure the relational, dynamic, and situational nature of leadership and emphasize the value of contextually grounded evaluation.

Cross-Cultural and Global Evidence: Insights from the GLOBE Studies

Much leadership scholarship reflects Western, industrialized assumptions [38]. The GLOBE studies [22] demonstrate that cultural values significantly shape expectations of leadership effectiveness. While some attributes-such as trustworthiness and foresight-are widely valued, many others are culturally contingent. Behaviors perceived as effective in one society may be interpreted as ineffective or even unethical in another. This global evidence affirms the central argument: ineffective leadership is best understood as a context-bound phenomenon, not a universally fixed category.

Contextual Sensitivity in Distinguishing Ineffective and Unethical Leadership

Ineffective leadership occupies a distinct yet frequently

intersecting space within broader discussions of bad leadership [26]. The challenge lies not only in categorizing harmful behaviors but in recognizing the ethical blind spots that complicate these distinctions. Leaders may unintentionally cause harm while believing their actions are appropriate, making intent, consequence, and recurrence central points of debate in defining unethical conduct [29]. Cultural variability further accentuates this complexity: practices condemned as authoritarian in one context may be interpreted as responsible stewardship in another. These complexities highlight the necessity of evaluative approaches that consider situational, relational, and cultural dynamics rather than relying solely on universal criteria.

Ethical ambiguity becomes more intelligible when considering the neurological processes underlying leader behavior. *Hannah et al., (2013)* [19] show that leaders' ability to hold multiple, sometimes conflicting, self representations is essential for navigating complex ethical environments. When self-complexity is low, leaders may oversimplify moral dilemmas, misinterpret risks, or rely on habitual responses that inadvertently cause harm. This neuroscientific insight reinforces the value of contextual evaluation: leadership failures often arise not from intentional misconduct alone but from cognitive limitations that shape how leaders perceive and respond to ethical challenges. It also clarifies why ineffective and unethical leadership frequently intersect in practice. Context, however, explains but does not excuse harmful behavior. Leaders remain accountable for their actions, but fairness requires evaluating those actions within situational constraints.

A contextual approach helps prevent misattributing failures solely to incompetence when ethical violations or systemic constraints are also present. As *Ciulla et al., (2020)* [10] argued, leadership must be judged not only by outcomes but also by the means and ends of leader actions. A contextual approach therefore avoids moral absolutism detached from lived realities while preserving accountability for unethical conduct, strengthening the distinction between ineffective and unethical leadership. This emphasis on contextual accountability raises an important question: What underlying mechanisms shape leader behavior under pressure, and why does misalignment emerge even when leaders possess contextual awareness? To address this, the next section turns to neuroscientific and biological insights that illuminate how stress, cognition, and physiological strain influence leadership effectiveness-and leadership harm-in real organizational environments.

Neuroscientific and Biological Insights for Developing Contextually Attuned Leaders

As leadership scholarship has advanced, it has become increasingly evident that context fundamentally shapes how leadership is perceived and enacted [25]. Cultural norms, generational differences, neurodiversity, and individual histories of trauma or burnout all filter leadership behaviors and produce diverse responses to the same leadership style. As *Kuhlmann and*

Kadgien *et al.*, (2018, p. 103) [28] noted, “if we know anything about the functions of the human brain and our interpersonal behaviors, it is that they are exquisitely complex and context dependent.” Neurochemistry does not excuse behavior, but it deeply contextualizes it. Our brains do not simply interpret the world; they chemically react to it. Integrating neuroscientific insights with contextual analysis, therefore, enables a more human-centered and adaptive approach to leadership evaluation.

Neuroscientific Mechanisms Sharing Leadership Behavior

Neuroscience offers a compelling foundation for understanding leadership by revealing how stress, fear, and social dynamics shape decision-making and relational behavior. Neuroleadership, defined as the application of cognitive, affective, and social neuroscience to leadership development, decision-making, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness, examines how brain systems involved in attention, stress response, motivation, and social cognition shape leadership behavior in real time [53]. This perspective supports the idea that leadership is not solely a behavioral or relational phenomenon but also a neurobiological one. Scholarship further demonstrates that leaders who apply neuroscience-based knowledge can cultivate more collaborative, inclusive, and motivating work environments where human potential is maximized and strategic goals are achieved more efficiently [11]. This aligns with emerging evidence that neurobiological awareness enhances leaders’ ability to regulate emotions, interpret social cues, and create climates that support psychological safety and engagement.

Neuroscientific research further clarifies why leaders respond differently to contextual pressures. [19] demonstrate that leaders with higher self-complexity—a richly differentiated internal sense of identity—show greater adaptive decision making under stress. Their brains process contextual cues more flexibly, allowing them to shift strategies, regulate emotions, and avoid the cognitive rigidity that often precedes harmful leadership behavior. Leaders with lower self-complexity, by contrast, are more vulnerable to stress induced narrowing of attention, habitual responses, and oversimplified interpretations of complex situations. These neurological mechanisms reinforce the argument that leadership effectiveness is inseparable from the way leaders’ brains perceive, interpret, and react to their environments. Leaders’ responses to stress, ambiguity, and relational strain are influenced by neural processes involving the amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and broader networks responsible for emotional regulation, impulse control, and ethical judgment. When chronic strain impairs these systems, leaders may default to reactive, inflexible, or avoidant behaviors—even when they intellectually understand what the situation requires. Conversely, cultivating emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and reflective awareness strengthens neural pathways associated with resilience and ethical decision-making.

These neurobiological mechanisms also clarify why ambiguous

harm often goes unnoticed and why followers may struggle to voice concerns under strain. Emotional activity in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex directly influences judgment, impulse regulation, and stress responses, shaping how leaders behave in complex environments [49]. Under chronic stress, executive functioning deteriorates, producing recurring patterns of ineffective leadership—avoidance, rigidity, heightened reactivity—even when leaders possess the intellectual knowledge to act differently [11,19,44,60,64,70]. Research on neuroplasticity further demonstrates that repeated leadership behaviors become ingrained over time [14], illustrating how contextual pressures shape habitual responses. Neuroscience therefore provides a scientifically grounded framework for developing contextually attuned leaders. It highlights how repeated leadership behaviors become neurologically reinforced through neuroplasticity, how stress physiology shapes judgment and relational dynamics, and how leaders can intentionally build habits that maintain alignment between behavior and situational demands.

Biological Foundations of Contextual Leadership

Biological insights deepen the contextual argument by showing how leaders’ cognitive, emotional, and physiological systems shape their behavior under pressure. While neuroleadership highlights how cognitive, affective, and social neural systems influence leadership in real time, the biological architecture underlying these systems explains why leaders respond differently to stress, ambiguity, and relational strain across contexts. At the biological level, the neuroanatomy of emotion—rooted in regions such as the amygdala, insula, and periaqueductal gray—shapes responses to fear, social threat, and relational behavior, all of which are central to workplace behavior. These systems regulate how leaders interpret environmental cues, assess risk, and engage relationally under strain. Emotions, organized by general information-processing principles, evolved to support adaptation to changing environments [15,46]. This evolutionary grounding highlights that emotional responses are not arbitrary disruptions to rational leadership, but biologically adaptive mechanisms shaped by context. Although Western traditions often separated reason from emotion [58], contemporary neuroscience demonstrates that cognition and emotion are deeply interdependent. Neural systems responsible for attention, perception, and decision-making operate in reciprocal, context-dependent ways [41,42,47,51,61]. This interdependence means that leaders’ cognitive clarity, ethical judgment, and relational behavior are inseparable from the emotional and physiological states activated within their environments.

These biological insights extend the neuroleadership perspective by showing that leadership cannot be understood apart from the embodied systems through which leaders interpret and respond to their surroundings. They underpin the central argument of this article: leadership effectiveness is not merely a function of skill or intention but a dynamic interplay between neurobiology and context. Recognizing this interplay enables leadership development to move beyond competency-based models toward approaches

that cultivate emotional regulation, contextual awareness, and adaptive capacity-qualities essential for sustaining ethical and effective leadership under strain. A contextual framework requires understanding not only external conditions but also the internal cognitive architecture leaders bring to those conditions. *Hannah et al.*, (2013) [19] found that leader self-complexity directly influences how leaders interpret situational demands. Leaders with greater psychological and neurological complexity are better able to integrate competing cues, anticipate consequences, and adjust their behavior to fit the environment. This supports the shift from static trait-based evaluation to dynamic alignment: leadership effectiveness emerges when leaders' internal complexity matches the complexity of the context. Misalignment-rather than inherent deficiency-often drives ineffective leadership, especially when leaders lack the cognitive flexibility needed to navigate ambiguity. Taken together, neuroscientific and biological insights deepen the contextual framework by showing how environmental pressures shape the cognitive, emotional, and relational systems that underlie leadership behavior. These mechanisms also provide the conceptual bridge to the next section on resilience, where the focus shifts from individual neurobiology to the broader ecological processes that support or undermine adaptive leadership. Hence, the next step is to examine resilience as an ecological process that shapes how leaders and followers adapt-or fail to adapt-within their environments.

Resilience as a Contextual and Dynamic Process

Building on the neuroscientific mechanisms outlined in the previous section, resilience offers a broader ecological lens for understanding how leaders and followers adapt-or struggle-within complex environments. While neuroscience explains how stress physiology shapes judgment and relational behavior, resilience theory clarifies why individuals and teams vary so widely in their responses to the same pressures. Resilience, conceptualized ecologically, is a dynamic process involving interactions among multiple systems across individuals and their contexts [68]. It is neither static nor universal; the balance of risk, protective, and promotive factors shifts with circumstances [7,33,50]. As a result, contexts that support resilience for some followers may undermine it for others. This is particularly evident among neurodivergent populations, whose resilience depends on careful alignment between individual needs and environmental conditions. Jacobs echoed this ecological view by emphasizing that resilience emerges from multilevel interactions among biological, psychological, and social systems, rather than from individual traits alone [24]. Adaptive functioning depends on how effectively individuals regulate stress responses, mobilize coping resources, and engage with supporting environments. Crucially, resilience is described as context-dependent, fluctuating with environmental demands, available supports, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. This aligns directly with leadership research showing that

organizational conditions, including communication quality, workload distribution, psychological safety, and relational trust, shape whether stress become manageable or overwhelming.

Hannah et al., (2013) [19] provided a compelling foundation for understanding resilience as both psychological and neurological. Leaders with higher self-complexity demonstrate greater resilience because they can draw on multiple internal identities and coping strategies when facing stress. This neurological flexibility allows them to remain adaptive, emotionally regulated, and ethically grounded even under intense pressure. In contrast, leaders with lower complexity may experience stress as identity threatening, leading to rigid decision making, ethical lapses, or withdrawal. Integrating these insights strengthens the argument that developing contextually attuned leaders requires cultivating the neurobiological capacity for complexity, not merely teaching behavioral skills. Leadership style interacts directly with these shifting resilience profiles. A directive approach may motivate some employees yet alienate others, especially in organizations with histories of exclusion, harm, or trauma. Structural dysfunction-resource scarcity, poor communication, excessive workloads-can further erode resilience and undermine leadership effectiveness, even among competent leaders. These conditions amplify stress physiology and reduce adaptive capacity, making misalignment more likely and recovery more difficult.

Recognizing these dynamics is essential for leadership development. Leaders must adapt to evolving resilience needs within their teams and respond to early indicators of strain before they escalate. A contextual approach therefore positions resilience not as an individual trait but as an emergent property of the interaction between leaders, followers, and situational demands. This ecological understanding bolsters the manuscript's central argument: leadership effectiveness is inseparable from the environments in which it unfolds, and resilience is one of the most critical mechanisms through which context shapes leadership outcomes. This ecological framing also sets the stage for examining the broader cultural, relational, and ethical conditions that influence leadership effectiveness. If resilience emerges through interactions between individuals and their environments, then organizational culture, norms, and ethical ambiguity become central determinants of how leaders are perceived-and how leadership misalignment develops over time. The next section extends this contextual analysis by exploring how culture, expectations, and meaning-making processes shape evaluations of leadership within real organizational systems.

Context, Culture, and Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is not static, nor is it solely defined by productivity or profit. Traditional performance metrics often obscure deeper organizational harm. High-profile cases across sectors demonstrate that leaders who appear successful under one set of conditions may struggle under another, reinforcing the

centrality of context, culture, and employee well-being in shaping leadership outcomes [2,14,22,25]. Ineffective leadership deserves careful analysis, as it often stems from maladaptive responses to contextual and organizational pressures rather than malicious intent. This perspective reframes ineffective leadership as a process shaped by stress, ambiguity, and relational erosion-conditions that can be mitigated through preventative, context-sensitive approaches. Leadership effectiveness, therefore, evolves in response to shifting cultural norms, organizational climates, and follower needs. This section completes the theoretical arc of the manuscript: leadership effectiveness is dynamic, relational, and inseparable from the environments in which it unfolds. It also sets the stage for the pedagogical implications that follow, where the focus shifts from explaining contextual leadership to teaching leaders how to recognize and respond to contextual pressures.

Advancing a Contextual Framework for Leadership Evaluation

A contextual framework extends the earlier argument by specifying how leadership effectiveness should be evaluated once universalistic models are set aside. Rather than reasserting the limitations of fixed criteria, this section develops the mechanisms through which context shapes leader performance. A contextual approach examines the interaction of leader behavior with situational demands, systemic constraints, cultural expectations, and follower interpretations, offering a structured way to understand why similar behaviors may produce different outcomes across settings. This framework shifts the focus from static traits to dynamic alignment, clarifying when misalignment-not inherent deficiency-drives ineffective leadership. By grounding evaluation in the lived realities of organizational environments, a contextual approach provides a more analytically rigorous and human-centered basis for assessing leadership behavior and its consequences.

Ineffective Leadership as a Distinct but Overlapping Construct

Within the broader construct of bad leadership, ineffective leadership occupies a distinct yet frequently overlapping position. Returning to *Kellerman's et al.*, (2004) [26] typology here is analytically useful-not to restate the framework, but to illustrate how contextual evaluation clarifies the boundaries between ineffective and unethical leadership. The overlap between these categories is consequential: leaders may simultaneously exhibit inadequate oversight, flawed judgment, and ethically questionable behaviors. Kellerman's third category-leaders who are both ineffective and unethical-demonstrates that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive and often intersect in practice. This intersection becomes especially visible in complex organizational failures, where contextual pressures, cultural dynamics, and ethical blind spots converge over time. The Boeing 737 MAX crisis illustrates how ineffective and unethical leadership can become

deeply intertwined across time, organizational levels, and cultural systems. As *Shonk et al.*, (2026) [57] reported, Boeing's failures were not isolated technical errors but symptoms of a long-standing pattern of ethical blind spots, cultural erosion, and systemic misalignment. The crashes of Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 revealed serious flaws in the 737 MAX design and exposed leadership decisions that prioritized market pressures and production timelines over engineering integrity and safety transparency.

Subsequent incidents-including the 2024 fuselage panel blowout on a 737 MAX and repeated Boeing Starliner capsule strandings-intensified scrutiny of Boeing's safety culture and accountability structures. Federal investigations bolstered these concerns. In 2025, the National Transportation Safety Board concluded that Boeing's quality assurance processes and organizational communication failures contributed to preventable safety risks, identifying systemic breakdowns in training, oversight and decision making [37]. The 2025 FAA audit similarly documented persistent quality control lapses and inadequate corrective action systems, underscoring the depth of organizational dysfunction. These failures occurred within a broader aviation ecosystem grappling with safety challenges. In 2026, two U.S. House committees unanimously advanced sweeping aviation safety reform legislation following a catastrophic January 2025 collision between an American Airlines regional jet and a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter that killed 67 people [56]. It was further documented that Boeing's ethical transgressions extend back decades-including illicit procurement of classified Pentagon documents, theft of competitor materials, and recurring quality control violations.

Across these crises, executives repeatedly expressed contrition and promised reform, only for new violations to emerge [57]. This cycle reflects a deeper cultural pattern: centralized corporate control, short term profitability pressures, and an environment in which engineers feared voicing safety concerns. These dynamics illustrate how leadership failures rooted in ethical blind spots and cultural misalignment can cascade into catastrophic outcomes, eroding public trust and destabilizing organizational resilience.

Comparable leadership failures have emerged across multiple sectors, demonstrating that ineffective and unethical leadership is rarely confined to a single industry. These cases underline the article's central argument: leadership breakdowns often arise from systemic misalignment, ethical blind spots, and cultural dysfunction, rather than isolated individual shortcomings. One of the most striking recent examples comes from Meta. As *Mirchandani et al.*, (2026) addressed, Meta has faced mounting evidence of child safety failures, including internal findings that its platforms expose minors to significant psychological and physical risks [73]. Yet investors-typically vocal on governance issues-remained largely silent. This silence reflects a deeper leadership problem: a culture in which profit driven incentives, algorithmic engagement pressures, and organizational defensiveness overshadow ethical

responsibility. Mirchandani argued that Meta's leadership failed not only in safeguarding vulnerable users but also in cultivating an environment where accountability could thrive. Engineers and safety teams reported feeling constrained or ignored, mirroring patterns seen in Boeing's internal culture. The absence of investor pressure further enabled leadership to deprioritize safety concerns, illustrating how external stakeholders can inadvertently reinforce internal misalignment. Wells Fargo offers another clear example of recurring leadership failure. According to CEO Today (2025) [9], the bank's leadership continued to struggle with ethical breaches years after its initial account fraud scandal. Despite public commitments to reform, Wells Fargo faced new allegations of improper fees, flawed risk controls, and failures in customer remediation. CEO Today notes that these issues stemmed from deep cultural dysfunction, including siloed decision making, inadequate oversight, and a leadership environment that rewarded short term gains over long term trust. Even after leadership turnover, the organization struggled to rebuild credibility, demonstrating how entrenched cultural problems can persist despite structural changes—a pattern strikingly similar to Boeing's repeated cycles of apology and recurrence.

Tesla provides another contemporary example of leadership failure rooted in systemic misalignment and cultural dysfunction. As PBS and U.S. News [45,69] narrated, federal regulators opened new investigations into Tesla's "Full Self Driving" (FSD) technology after additional crashes—including fatal ones—occurred while the system was engaged. These probes highlighted recurring patterns: Tesla allegedly downplayed known safety risks, overstated the capabilities of its driver assistance technology, and failed to implement adequate safeguards despite repeated warnings from regulators and engineers. Internal accounts described pressure to meet aggressive timelines, reluctance from executives to acknowledge system limitations, and dynamics that discouraged raising safety concerns. These behaviors mirror the same cultural patterns seen in Boeing and other crisis-stricken organizations: pressure driven decision making, organizational silencing, and misalignment between public claims and operational realities. The core truth these cases expose is austere: organizational culture is never the polished narrative leaders present publicly. It is the lived reality employees navigate privately; what they believe they must do to survive, succeed, and be rewarded. Culture is shaped less by mission statements and more by the unwritten rules people learn through consequences, silence, and incentives. It is the accumulation of micro-behaviors, tolerated shortcuts, ignored warnings, and rewarded outcomes. When employees conclude that speaking up is punished, that speed outweighs safety, or that profit eclipses ethics, those beliefs—not leadership's rhetoric—become the real operating system of the organization. This assertion anchors the broader argument: leadership effectiveness cannot be separated from the cultural conditions leaders create, tolerate, or fail to correct. Culture is not declared; it is enacted. And when the enacted culture diverges from the stated one, misalignment becomes inevitable.

Ethical Ambiguity and the Challenge of Classification

The cross-industry cases outlined in the previous section demonstrate how real-world leadership failures rarely conform to neat theoretical boundaries. Each example revealed leaders who were ineffective in some respects, unethical in others, and constrained by contextual pressures that shaped their decisions. These patterns demonstrate the complexity of evaluating leadership behavior: flawed oversight, cultural dysfunction, ethical blind spots, and systemic misalignment often coexist and reinforce one another. This pattern directly reflects assertion that ineffective and unethical leadership frequently intersect, and it sets the stage for how and why this intersection complicates classification [26]. Ethical blind spots further complicate this ambiguity. Leaders may unintentionally cause harm while believing they are acting appropriately. Lašáková and Remišová (2015) defined unethical leadership as intentional or unintentional, active or passive, and recurrent influence that harms others—highlighting ongoing scholarly disagreement regarding intent, consequence, and recurrence. As *Thompson et al.*, (2024) [63] noted, leadership failures rarely fit neatly into discrete categories; incompetence, ethical violations, and contextual pressures often interact.

This fluidity points to the imperative of contextual evaluation. Ethical judgments are filtered through cultural norms, institutional expectations, and situational pressures, making universal classifications insufficient for capturing the complexity of real-world leadership failures. A contextual approach helps prevent misattributing failures solely to incompetence when ethical violations or systemic constraints are also present, ensuring that leaders are evaluated fairly while still held accountable for harmful behavior. The ambiguity surrounding ineffective and unethical leadership also points to a deeper reality: leadership failures are not interpreted solely through the actions of leaders themselves. They are experienced, filtered, and ultimately defined by followers. Employees, stakeholders, regulators, and the public make sense of leadership behavior through their own perceptions, expectations, and lived experiences within the organizational system. The same leadership act may be viewed as incompetent, unethical, or contextually constrained depending on who is evaluating it and under what conditions.

The examples demonstrate this interpretive complexity. In each case, followers played a critical role in shaping how leadership failures were understood and responded to. Their perceptions influenced whether concerns were voiced or silenced, whether risks were escalated or ignored, and whether leaders were challenged, defended, or allowed to continue harmful practices. These dynamics emphasize that leadership misalignment is not produced by leaders alone; it emerges from the relational and perceptual space between leaders and followers. Thus, the challenge of classification naturally extends into the challenge of perception. If leadership failures are ambiguous, overlapping, and context dependent, then understanding how followers interpret, reinforce,

or resist leadership behavior becomes essential. Followership is not a passive backdrop-it is an active force that shapes organizational meaning making, cultural norms, and the trajectory of leadership effectiveness. The next section examines how followers construct these perceptions, how they respond to leadership misalignment, and how their actions can either mitigate or magnify organizational harm.

Leadership Effectiveness as Perception: The Role of Followership

Universalistic approaches risk oversimplification by framing leadership solely as outcome-driven, whereas a contextual perspective recognizes that effectiveness is also a matter of perception. Leadership cannot be fully understood without considering followership, because evaluations of effectiveness are filtered through the subjective interpretations of those being led. As *Oc and Bashshur et al.*, (2013) [40] emphasized the perceptual foundation noting that “leadership exists in the minds of followers (p. 920).” Followers construct leadership meaning through cognitive schemas, attribution processes, and contextual cues, forming what can be understood as a perceptual-attribution framework. In this view, leadership effectiveness is not an objective property of leader behavior but a subjective interpretation shaped by how followers make sense of what they see. Leader self-complexity also shapes how leaders perceive follower behavior. demonstrated that leaders with higher neurological complexity are better able to interpret follower cues accurately, regulate emotional reactions, and integrate dissenting perspectives into decision making [19]. Leaders with lower complexity may misread follower intentions, perceive feedback as threat, or respond defensively-amplifying misalignment. This supports the argument that leadership failure is relational: it emerges from the perceptual space between leaders and followers, shaped by how leaders neurologically process follower signals in context.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) [67] extended this perceptual foundation by situating followership within a broader relational framework. They argued that “the significance of following for leadership means that our understanding of leadership is incomplete without an understanding of followership”, reinforcing that leadership and followership are inseparable components of the same social process: if there were no followers, there could be no leadership. Their work highlighted that followers actively co produce leadership outcomes through sense making, identity processes, and relational dynamics. Influence moves fluidly between individuals, and who is leading or following can shift rapidly. This relational dynamism challenges static, leader centric models and confirms that leadership effectiveness emerges through interaction rather than through leader traits alone.

Together, these perspectives clarify that leadership effectiveness is shaped by three interdependent forces:

a. Leader signals - behaviors, communication patterns,

emotional tone

- b. Follower schemas** - expectations, prior experiences, cultural norms
- c. Contextual cues** - organizational climate, constraints, power structures

This means leadership effectiveness is not simply a function of what leaders *do*, but how followers *interpret* what leaders do within a specific environment. A leader’s behavior may be identical across situations, yet perceived as supportive in one context and ineffective, or even unethical, in another. This perceptual variability endorses the need for evaluative frameworks that account for relational dynamics and contextual realities. Whereas *Oc and Bashshur et al.*, (2013) [40] explained how followers interpret leader behavior, *Uhl-Bien et al.*, (2014) clarified why these interpretations matter: followers are active participants who co-produce leadership outcomes through sense-making, identity processes, and relational dynamics. Together, these perspectives position leadership effectiveness as both perceptual and relational, shaped by ongoing interactions rather than by leader traits alone. This perceptual dimension becomes especially salient in environments where systemic constraints-such as rigid hierarchies, institutional rules, or scarce resources-limit leaders’ ability to enact change. [40] noted that followers often rely on attribution processes to make sense of leader behavior [40]. When followers lack visibility into structural barriers, they may attribute negative outcomes to the leader rather than to contextual limitations. As a result, leaders operating within politically constrained or under-resourced contexts may perform competently yet still be misclassified as ineffective when evaluations fail to account for these structural barriers. A contextual framework helps prevent conflating individual shortcomings with systemic misalignment, thereby promoting more accurate and equitable assessments of leadership performance. Integrating *Oc and Bashshur’s* perceptual model with *Uhl-Bien et al.’s* followership theory strengthens the manuscript’s central argument: leadership effectiveness must be understood not only through outcomes, but through the relational and interpretive processes that shape how those outcomes are perceived. Recognizing leadership as a co-constructed, context-dependent phenomenon warrants the case for evaluative approaches that account for both follower cognition and the environments in which leaders and followers interact. This insight provides a natural transition to the next section, which examines how cultural meaning making processes further shape evaluations of leadership within complex organizational systems.

Cultural Context and Leadership Evaluation Under Extreme Conditions

Zoogah et al., (2025) examined employee flourishing and moral obligation in extreme conditions, demonstrating that followers’ interpretations of leader behavior are profoundly shaped by contextual adversity. Their findings show that under high pressure or high-risk environments, employees rely even more heavily

on cognitive schemas, moral expectations, and relational cues to evaluate leadership. In such contexts, followers often construct meaning not only from what leaders do, but from how leaders signal care, fairness, and moral responsibility. When these signals are absent or ambiguous, followers may perceive leadership as ineffective or unethical even when leaders are constrained by structural or environmental limitations. Culture significantly influences perceptions of leadership effectiveness, particularly under extreme conditions. Research on organizational responses to crises demonstrates that some organizations foster resilience by prioritizing employee well-being, while others exacerbate risks by maintaining rigid expectations [5,55,65,72]. These divergent responses illustrate that leadership effectiveness cannot be evaluated independently of cultural values and organizational norms. Followers interpret leader behavior through the cultural logics available to them - norms about authority, expectations of care, and assumptions about fairness - making culture a central mediator of leadership perception.

Because much leadership research originates in Western contexts, culturally specific assumptions may shape universalistic models [38]. A contextual approach therefore requires sensitivity to cultural variation in leadership expectations, interpretations, and outcomes. Evaluating leaders fairly requires acknowledging how cultural norms shape what followers perceive as effective, ethical, or appropriate behavior. In extreme conditions, these cultural expectations become even more salient: followers look for moral obligation, relational support, and signals of shared vulnerability. When leaders fail to meet these culturally grounded expectations, followers may interpret their behavior as misaligned, uncaring, or morally deficient-even when leaders are acting within severe constraints. Taken together, this research supports the article's broader argument: leadership effectiveness is not solely a function of leader behavior or organizational outcomes. It is co constructed through follower cognition, cultural meaning making, and contextual pressures. Understanding leadership in extreme conditions requires an ecological perspective that accounts for how leaders, followers, and cultural systems interact to shape perceptions of effectiveness, ethicality, and obligation.

Reflexive and Lived Accounts as Pedagogical Tools

Reflexive and lived accounts further anchor this pedagogical approach in the contextual realities of organizational life. Narratives of prolonged ambiguity, emotional exhaustion, and the normalization of dysfunction help students grasp how leadership harm is experienced by followers. These accounts legitimize discomfort as a form of knowledge and frame resistance as a strategy of nervous system preservation rather than defiance. Integrating lived experience into leadership education makes early harm legible, ethically resonant, and directly relevant to the contextual pressures leaders will encounter. These pedagogical tools reinforce the article's preventative orientation by helping leaders recognize early indicators of misalignment to move from

reactive to proactive approach.

Implications for Leadership Development

The developmental implications of this contextual perspective are substantial. If leadership failure often emerges gradually through physiological strain, relational erosion, and organizational ambiguity, then leadership education must shift from a reactive model to a preventative one. Preparing leaders to recognize early indicators of misalignment such as emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, moral fatigue, and declining participation enables intervening before harm becomes visible or irreversible. Integrating insights from stress physiology, burnout research, neuroleadership, and reflexive accounts illuminates how harm accumulates and why followers may struggle to voice concerns under strain. A preventative orientation aligns leadership development with the lived realities of organizational life, equipping leaders to cultivate ethical climates proactively rather than respond only after breakdowns occur. This approach reframes leadership development as a process of continuous contextual attunement rather than episodic skill acquisition.

Advancing Leadership Education

Building on this developmental orientation, the framework advances strategies for teaching leadership responsibility before harm escalates. If ineffective leadership is best understood as a misalignment between leader behavior and situational demands, then leadership education must help emerging leaders identify early physiological, relational, and organizational indicators of that misalignment. Leadership programs often emphasize extreme cases-catastrophic ethical breaches, toxic leadership, or organizational collapse-but these represent the endpoint of processes that begin much earlier and are shaped by context. Leadership and followership are dynamic processes shaped by context [28], and this dynamism requires educators to move beyond trait-based or heroic paradigms toward approaches that foreground situational complexity.

In a recent conference presentation, I introduced a developmental model tracing how subtle, ambiguous leadership behaviors accumulate into significant organizational harm. A forthcoming article elaborates this model, which I have termed the continuum of harm. While the present paper does not rely on that model as a formal framework, it draws on its central insight: leadership-related injury emerges gradually through contextual pressures, stress responses, and relational erosion-not solely through dramatic misconduct. This insight validates the contextual approach by emphasizing that early harm is inseparable from the environments in which leaders and followers operate. Leadership education, therefore, must move beyond heroic or trait-based paradigms and embrace the complexity of context as a core developmental principle. Doing so prepares leaders to recognize misalignment early, respond ethically under pressure, and cultivate environments where followers can voice concerns without fear-key

outcomes for any preventative model of leadership development.

Stress Physiology as a Foundation for Preventative Leadership

Stress physiology provides a compelling foundation for this preventative leadership development. Chronic strain impairs cognition, narrows attention, and reduces ethical capacity-conditions that increase the likelihood of contextual misalignment. Teaching leaders to interpret emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, and moral fatigue as contextual warning signals rather than personal deficiencies helps them identify when their behavior is drifting out of alignment with situational demands. This physiological grounding also clarifies why ambiguous harm often goes unnoticed and why followers may struggle to voice concerns under strain. A developmental perspective further illustrates how small, ambiguous behaviors accumulate into systemic dysfunction. Early indicators such as withdrawal, absenteeism, and declining participation often precede entrenched outcomes like moral distress, learned helplessness, and burnout [3,18,30,31,52,59]. These patterns demonstrate how everyday leadership practices interact with contextual pressures to shape long term organizational health-reinforcing the argument that leadership effectiveness cannot be evaluated apart from context.

Practical Implications for Leadership Practice

The practical implications of this contextual approach extend directly to everyday leadership behavior. Leaders who understand how stress, ambiguity, and relational strain shape decision-making are better equipped to adjust their communication, pacing, and expectations in real time. Recognizing early signs of overload-hesitation, withdrawal, irritability, or reduced cognitive flexibility-allows leaders to intervene with supportive strategies before patterns become entrenched. Practices such as reflective check-ins, workload calibration, and relational repair conversations operationalize preventative leadership and help leaders translate contextual awareness into actionable behaviors. These practices uphold the idea that effective leadership is not merely a set of competencies but an ongoing, embodied process of attunement, awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability.

Organizational Implications

Extending this perspective to the organizational level reveals that leadership effectiveness is a systemic outcome rather than an individual trait. Structures, norms, and resource flows either buffer or intensify the physiological and relational pressures that shape leader behavior. Organizations that prioritize psychological safety, transparent communication, and manageable workloads create conditions in which leaders and followers can thrive. Conversely, environments marked by chronic stress, unclear expectations, or cultural contradictions can undermine even highly skilled leaders. Recognizing these dynamics encourages organizations to adopt preventative strategies-such as redesigning workflows, strengthening feedback systems, and aligning values

with practices-that reduce the likelihood of leadership failure. This systemic orientation positions leadership as a shared responsibility embedded within the broader organizational ecology, reinforcing the central argument of this manuscript: leadership development must account for the contextual forces that shape behavior long before harm becomes visible.

In summary, the preceding sections establish a comprehensive foundation for understanding leadership through a contextual lens. The analysis has traced how leader behavior interacts with situational demands, cultural norms, physiological strain, ethical ambiguity, and organizational systems to shape both effectiveness and harm. This integrated perspective demonstrates that leadership cannot be meaningfully evaluated through universalistic criteria or trait-based assumptions. Instead, leadership effectiveness emerges from dynamic alignment between leaders, followers, and the environments they share. With these foundations established, the conclusion returns to the article's opening claim and synthesizes the argument: leadership failure is rarely what it first appears to be, and only a contextual lens can capture its true nature.

Conclusion

Leadership failure is rarely as simple as it first appears. Just as the opening of this article invites readers to look beyond surface level judgments, the conclusion reinforces that leadership must be evaluated within the contextual realities that shape it. Universalistic models may offer tidy explanations, but they cannot account for the pressures, constraints, cultural norms, and ethical complexities that influence how leaders act and how followers interpret those actions. The evidence presented throughout this manuscript affirms that "ineffective leadership is best understood as a context bound phenomenon rather than a universally fixed category," and that misalignment-rather than inherent deficiency-more accurately captures the nature of leadership failure. By tracing the interplay between leader behavior, situational demands, organizational culture, and ethical ambiguity, this article demonstrates why simplistic evaluations obscure more than they reveal. The overlap between ineffective and unethical leadership further highlights the need for evaluative frameworks that recognize complexity while maintaining accountability. A contextual approach offers a more precise, equitable, and realistic foundation for understanding leadership effectiveness. It recognizes that leaders operate within systems, that followers shape perceptions, and that environments define what effectiveness requires.

In this sense, the conclusion returns to the same quiet moments described in the introduction-the moments when pressure intensifies, resources diminish, and leaders must act with incomplete information. These are the conditions under which leadership is most often judged, yet least often understood. A contextual perspective reveals that what appears ineffective from a distance may, within its environment, be the only course that preserves stability, morale, or long-term viability. It reframes leadership not as a static set of traits but as an adaptive process

shaped by constraints, culture, and human dynamics. Ultimately, this article argues for a shift from universalistic assumptions to contextually grounded evaluation and development. Leadership effectiveness emerges not from static traits or heroic narratives, but from the dynamic alignment between leaders, followers, and the environments they share. A contextual perspective provides the conceptual clarity and ethical grounding necessary to evaluate leadership fairly, develop leaders proactively, and prevent harm long before it becomes visible. Yet this shift also invites a deeper reconsideration of what leadership is. If effectiveness is inseparable from context, then leadership becomes less a fixed identity and more an evolving relationship shaped by pressures, constraints, and collective meaning-making. This reframing also invites deeper questions—one that mirrors the curiosity of the introduction: if leadership is shaped most profoundly in its quietest, most constrained moments, what new possibilities emerge when we evaluate leaders not by what they achieve under ideal conditions, but how they navigate the imperfect ones? A further question follows naturally for scholars and practitioners: what new forms of leadership might emerge if effectiveness were judged not by outcomes alone, but by how well leaders remain attuned to the contexts that shape their behavior? The future of contextual leadership scholarship, and the leaders our organizations ultimately cultivate, may depend on how we choose to answer those questions.

Dedications

Joseph - There will be moments that test your courage, stretch your heart, and reveal the depth of your character. As those moments come, remember you were born with a light that does not dim. You carry a gentleness that strengthens others, a curiosity that opens doors, and a resilience that will guide you through every chapter ahead. One day, you look back and realize that every challenge, every moment of doubt, and every step you took, whether steady or trembling, was shaping you into the leader you were always meant to become with that quiet strength, deep kindness, and a way of seeing the world that is uniquely yours. These are the foundations of leadership that endures. Leadership is not about being perfect; it is about being present. It is choosing courage when comfort is easier, choosing compassion when frustration is louder, and integrity even when no one is watching. You already do these things more naturally than you know. And another thing...continue with color and creativity. Harness your mind that thinks boldly, and a spirit that refuses to quit. Those qualities will carry you farther than any title ever could. And when life becomes heavy, and it will, you will still rise, because rising is what you were built for. My hope for you is simple and lifelong: Lead with kindness. Stand with courage. Love without hesitation. And trust that you are becoming exactly who you are meant to be. I believe in you with a certainty that never wavers. I am proud of you in ways words will never fully capture.

Ella and Maria- May you continue to grow with resilience, compassion, courage, and a steady faith in the possibility within every person, and within yourselves. May you meet hardship with strength, to see context before criticism, and to trust that even in difficult seasons, you carry more light than they know. Even when

my love or presence was harder to see, it never left you. Distance never diminished it.

Sunny - You are a burst of color in a world that sometimes forgets how to shine. Your laughter, your curiosity, your tiny but mighty spirit—these are the beginnings of a life filled with wonder. You remind us that joy is a form of courage, and that even the smallest voices can brighten the darkest rooms. As you grow, may you always keep that spark. May you dance into every new day with the same fearless delight you carry now. You are our sunshine, in every season.

Lucas - You are still so new to this world, yet you have already changed it simply by being here. In your quietness, in your softness, in the way you look up with wide, wondering eyes, you remind us that hope begins small and grows strong. You are held in love, surrounded by family who will guide you, protect you, and cheer for you as you discover who you are. May your life be filled with gentleness, strength, and the kind of courage that grows slowly and steadily, just like you. You are a promise of tomorrow, wrapped in the sweetness of today.

I will always be in your corner, cheering for you, steadying you, and loving you through every chapter ahead. Lead boldly, knowing I love you. The world needs what only you can bring. You are all the continuation of every hope, every lesson, every act of love that came before you. And you are loved beyond measure, always, endlessly, and without condition.

Mother-You taught me that strength is not loud; it is consistent. It is the quiet, unwavering presence that holds a family together, even when life feels unbearably heavy. Your endurance, your tenderness, your fierce devotion; these are the gifts you passed to me, and through me to those I love. You showed me how to lead with heart, how to love without condition, and how to rise with dignity no matter how many times life tries to bend you. This dedication carries your fingerprints. Your legacy of kindness lives in all of us. Father- You taught me one of the most important lessons a leader can learn: cheer for the underdog. You rooted for the overlooked, the underestimated, the quiet fighters who needed someone in their corner.

Together, you showed me to see context before judgment with faith and that shaped the way I see leadership and humanity. And I pray it will shape the way Sunny and Lucas learn to see the world: with compassion, faith, courage, and an unwavering belief in the possibility inside every person. Your legacy is hope. Your legacy is heart. Your legacy is love. Your legacy is the quiet courage to believe in people even when their context is hard to see. And it is the reminder—woven through every lesson you gave—that we must always consider context before judgment.

Brother- You taught me that even when life carries us down different paths, we can always find our way back to one another by building common ground. We may not always see eye to eye, and there may be seasons when our perspectives feel miles apart, but the love our mother poured into us and the faith Sr. Julia nurtured within us remains a bond that cannot be broken. If we struggle to

find agreement, we will still find that shared truth: we were raised in a love that endures, a faith that steadies, kindness that is resilient, and a family, built from our grandparent's foundation, that believes in returning to one another. No matter the distance, no matter the differences, we will always share that ultimate love and faith. And I pray that will always be enough to bring us home to each other.

With more than two decades in higher education, I bring both academic depth and applied expertise to this work. As a neuropsychologist with a PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and a Doctorate of Business Administration, my scholarship explores the intersection of **rehumanizing leadership** through an integrated approach and disruption framework-one that challenges outdated norms and restores humanity to the center of leadership practice. My work, published and presented internationally, bridges compassion and evidence-based leadership to advance humane, trauma informed, and contextually attuned approaches to organizational life. At its core, my mission is simple and enduring: to spread kindness in the world, in honor of my mother, whose quiet strength and unwavering love taught me that leadership begins with how we choose to treat one another.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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