

Understanding Organizational Leadership: An Analytic Perspective of a Concept and Its Frequent Detrimental Misuse

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Abstract

Every organization and its component units have someone at the helm as the head. The head may be a manager or a leader, and sometimes the two co-exist in one person. However, it is an error to address a manager as a leader when the person does not have a follower. The distinctions and similarities between the two forms of headship have been presented in some studies. Among the distinctions is the fact that managers have subordinates, and leaders have followers. Despite the differences, it is still common for the headship forms to be conflated with each other. This study advances additional knowledge to distinguish between leadership and management through six factors and highlights the detriment to leadership when it is conflated with management. The conundrum that occurs when a manager becomes a leader is also addressed. Recommendations for refraining from conflating management with leadership and investing in managers to develop leadership competencies and become leaders are made in the concluding section of this study.

Keywords

Understanding and Defining Leadership, Leadership and Management Conflation, Leadership Competencies, Leadership Concept Misuse, Leadership Influence, Endorsed Power, Authorized Power

1. Introduction

This article was inspired by the book “Leadership Competencies in Organizations: Are You a Ruler, Manager, or Leader?” What Makes You One? (Oyinlade, 2025). However, other studies, such as “The Ambiguous Relationship between Leadership and Management” (Cossiga, 2025) and “Management and Leadership in the

Contemporary University” (Yielder & Codling, 2024), added some enthusiasm for conducting this study. The key point in these studies and others, such as Chen and Zhao (2024), Harris and Williams (2023), as well as Lee and Kim (2022), is that leadership is distinctly different from management, and that efforts must be made, both in theoretical writings and administrative practices, to avoid conflating the two concepts. This article aims to further accentuate this important point. Beyond emphasizing the problem of conflation and, in the process, corroborating the book, this article also introduces new literature on management and leadership beyond the book, delves into the key factors that distinguish the two concepts from each other, and highlights the unintended, detrimental consequences of conflating them.

Leadership as a concept and behavior has been a subject of fascination, inquiry, scholarly research, and inspirational reports by both scholars and non-scholar authors for several decades. It is a subject matter that has attracted attention due to its real or perceived expectations for enhancing employee and organizational performance. Hence, a plethora of research papers, textbooks, training manuals, and other books exist on the topic. Like leadership, a plethora of literature also exists in the form of textbooks and scientific papers on management. This literature primarily emphasizes the undeniable importance of managerial activities in achieving organizational success. For example, the US managerial ranks achieved a corporate productivity that yielded a gross domestic product (GDP) of roughly \$ 23 trillion, the highest in the world, and approximately 24 percent of the total global GDP in 2021 (World Bank Data, 2021). Additionally, according to industry aggregates for 2022, 2023, and 2024, US corporations reported collective corporate profits with inventory valuation and capital consumption adjustments of over \$2.9 trillion, \$3.1 trillion, and \$3.3 trillion, respectively. In the same years, corporate profits by the same measure for the rest of the world were \$444.9 billion, \$489.5 billion, and \$483.6 billion, respectively (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025).

Without doubt, the economic success of US corporations is astounding, and corporate managers can take a well-deserved victory lap for their managerial skills and prowess in getting their workers to be so productive. However, as Oyinlade (2025) pointed out, managerial success is not a substitute for leadership. Chief corporate executives still express strong preferences for leaders over managers as unit heads and at the helm of corporations. While US corporations are undoubtedly replete with good managers, as demonstrated by the aforementioned corporate productivity and profit figures, research such as Lowe et al. (1996), Aragón-Correa et al. (2007), and Vasilescu (2019), among others, argued that leadership still produces higher employee performance than management. Given the importance of formal education for a successful society, Stein (2016) also argued that US schools needed leaders rather than managers to be competitive in the global arena. All these studies argued that leaders use vision-setting and influence to encourage followers to achieve self-actualization, resulting in higher employee productivity, motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment than typically

obtained under managers (Oyinlade, 2025). As Vasilescu expressed, studies have “suggested that leaders manage to motivate employees to be competitive through charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individual consideration” (Vasilescu, 2019: p. 48). This position supports the argument that while management may be beneficial and even necessary, leaders and leadership remain preferred and are in high demand in US corporations. This preference may be argued to be especially critical today as organizations face cut-throat domestic and global competition, adapt to rapidly changing performance technology and consumer preferences (Oyinlade, 2025), and successfully navigate through a myriad of government regulations.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph above, Oyinlade (2025) notes that management is often conflated with leadership. This conflation can be found in both technical scientific papers on leadership and in books by management practitioners. In many cases, organizational science literature often correctly defines and differentiates between the two concepts but eventually resorts to using them interchangeably, thereby nullifying the initial distinction made between them. This practice is so common in literature and everyday use of the term leadership that Oyinlade (2025: p. 25) coined it as “*commonly accepted standard error (CASE)*”.

The conflation is not merely an informal error but is systematically observed in scholarly and professional writings. Lee and Kim (2022) conducted a systematic review of management and leadership literature published between 2010 and 2022. Their analysis revealed that in approximately 40 percent of the articles, particularly those focused on practical applications in business and healthcare, the terms “leader” and “manager” were used synonymously, with no operational distinction made between the concepts. This suggests that a significant portion of academic research inadvertently reinforces the blurring of these concepts. Furthermore, this conflation is perhaps more pronounced in practitioner-oriented materials. A content analysis of corporate job descriptions and leadership development programs by Harris and Williams (2023) found that over 75 percent of postings for “Manager” positions listed requirements such as “inspiring teams” and “creating a vision” (core leadership competencies) alongside “budget management” and “process optimization” (core management competencies), without delineating the different skill sets required for each. This suggests that organizations often design roles that implicitly result in a blend of both functions but label and evaluate them under a single, often mismatched, framework.

The frequency of conflation is also evident in the tools used to assess effectiveness. Chen and Zhao (2024) argue that many widely used 360-degree feedback instruments and performance appraisal systems contribute to the problem. Their research found that metrics designed to evaluate a manager’s administrative efficiency (e.g., meeting deadlines, staying within budget) are often combined with scales measuring leadership influence (e.g., fostering innovation, building trust) into a single composite score. This practice, as noted by Chen and Zhao (2024),

“obscures the unique contributions of each domain and fails to provide diagnostic feedback for targeted development” (p. 252). When organizations measure “good management” and “good leadership” with the same stick, they implicitly communicate that they are the same thing.

One may curiously ask why it matters that management and leadership are used interchangeably, as Oyinlade also queried, especially in light of the above-mentioned successes of US corporations. What makes leadership so highly preferred to management that organizational executives and consultants claim it is better to have leaders than managers? These questions take center stage in this study. They form the nucleus of the discussion in this article, culminating in the implications of conflating management and leadership as CASE, and the benefits of avoiding this error.

2. The Present Study: Objective

Drawing on Oyinlade (2025), this study aims to disentangle management and leadership, explaining why the two forms of headship should not be conflated. Due to the inconsistencies and conflation in the use of these two concepts, the primary objective of this article is to provide an accurate explanation and discussion of both concepts without conflating them. This will provide a much-needed understanding of what leadership is and what it is not without any confusion. “If a manager is to become a leader, it is essential to know what it means to be a leader compared to being a manager so as to have a clear understanding of the destination of one’s intended transformation” (Oyinlade, 2025: p. 27). By separating management from leadership and not equating them, this article offers an accurate explanation of both concepts and stands as a critical departure from the tradition of conflating them.

3. Analytical Framework

Given the objective of this study, which is to distinguish between management and leadership, an analytical framework was used to compare and contrast the two forms of headship. Relevant idea and excerpts from Oyinlade (2025), a review of additional relevant literature, and logical deductive reasoning were used to examine and explain each concept along six dimensions: 1) definitions, 2) status formality and legitimacy, 3) goal orientation and assignment, 4) power base for goal attainment, 5) command group relationships, and 6) command group performance outcomes. For each dimension, comparisons and contrasts were made as warranted for clarity. Implications for the misuse or conflation of headship concepts are also discussed to reinforce the importance of demarcating between these concepts. These six factors are deemed adequate in this study for distinguishing between management and leadership, providing necessary clarity to discourage the continuation of their conflation.

While many distinguishing traits may be used to distinguish leadership from management, contemporary studies have largely provided strong, empirical justi-

fication for distinguishing leadership from management through the lens of the six characteristics used in this study. They include studies on leadership by [García \(2023\)](#) and [Lee & Kim \(2022\)](#), which explicitly contrasted the definitions of leadership and management. For power bases and status formality, [Thompson's \(2021\)](#) work on formal versus personal power is relevant, and [Ibrahim and Omar \(2024\)](#) emphasize the importance of emergent leadership, where an individual without formal authority gains influence through expertise, trust, and interpersonal skills, thereby demonstrating the informality of the “leader” status. Regarding unit goals, [O'Neil \(2022\)](#) and [Lee and Kim \(2022\)](#) emphasized the importance of the differences between a leader and a manager in goal attainment processes. In addition, the follower-subordinate distinction was analyzed in [Chen & Zhao's \(2024\)](#) study on relational dynamics, while performance outcomes were discussed in both [O'Neil's \(2022\)](#) change-orientation research and the systematic literature review by [Harris & Williams \(2023\)](#).

4. Analytical Differentiation: Management versus Leadership

4.1. Definitions

It is essential to establish a clear understanding of a phenomenon, particularly when comparing and contrasting it with another, by using appropriate definitions. A definition is considered appropriate for the purpose of this study if it addresses the essence of a phenomenon consistently with reasonable and logical deduction from the ideal characteristics of the phenomenon (see [Weber, 2010](#)). Such a definition is especially appropriate when it is consistent with the core tenet of other scholars or when it differs from theirs based on new logic that extends knowledge of the phenomenon. This is why understanding both management and leadership begins with their distinct definitions, as outlined in this study.

An examination of the definitions of both concepts reveals the presence of diversity in their interpretations. This, therefore, necessitates the presentation of multiple definitions for each concept to capture their differences and similarities. To this effect, five definitions spanning roughly seventy-two years are examined in defining management. Starting with Henri Fayol, management is defined as the conduct of activities, including planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling others, to achieve goals ([Fayol, 1949](#)). For Paton, management is the creation of the conditions under which work is to be done, and done well ([Paton, 1991](#)). Another definition describes management as the use of authority to oversee the efficient allocation of resources, to make sound judgments in the prudent use of subordinates' labor, and to oversee organizational functions ([Gardner, 2000](#)). These functions are the same as those in Fayol's definition, and they are repeated in [Stein's \(2016\)](#) definition, which states that, “...management is the application of social scientific principles with a focus on planning, organizing, directing, and controlling” (p. 22). Most similar to Gardner was [Lussier \(2021\)](#), who defined management as the process of achieving organizational objectives through the efficient use of organizational resources.

Like management, leadership can also be defined in many ways. As [Stogdill \(1974\)](#) noted, leadership scholars define it in their own individual ways; hence, one would find as many definitions of the concept as there are scholars who define it. Consistent with Stogdill's claims, [Bennis and Nanus \(2007\)](#) said there were over 350 definitions of leadership in the 30 years prior to their study in 1985. The variety of definitions may be attributed to the intuitiveness of the concept, which makes it difficult for scholars to accept just one definition ([Conger, 1992](#)). One definition states that leadership is the "interpersonal influence exercised in a situation, and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals" ([Tannenbaum et al., 1961: p. 24](#)). Similarly, [Rodrigues \(2001\)](#) defined leadership as the use of influence by one person to guide another or others toward the attainment of an objective. Also, [Pride and his colleagues \(2008, p. 224\)](#) defined leadership as "the process of influencing people to work toward a common goal," while Hoy and Miskel claimed leadership to be a social process in which an individual or a group is influenced to achieve a shared goal ([Hoy & Miskel, 2013](#)). Additionally, Ossai and his colleagues recently expressed leadership as a social influence process that involves obtaining the voluntary participation of others to achieve organizational goals ([Ossai et al., 2025](#)). Lastly, [Lusier and Achua \(2023\)](#) define the concept as the influence of leaders on followers in achieving organizational objectives through voluntary change.

Despite the differences in the definitions for each form of organizational headship, a careful examination of the sets of definitions reveals a consistency in the core elements of each headship form. At the same time, the definitions distinguish between the two forms. The definitions of management consistently express the conduct of organizational functions through the effective and efficient utilization of both material resources and labor. Functions such as planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, and supervising are essential management activities that contribute significantly to an organization's success. Therefore, the essence of management is primarily overseeing the design and implementation of resources and human activities to achieve organizational objectives. It is the arrangement and judicious use of organizational resources to accomplish organizational goals ([Bate-man & Snell, 2013](#); [Stroh, Northcraft, & Neale, 2002](#)).

In the same manner that a common theme exists among the definitions of management, a theme can also be discerned across the various definitions of leadership. This theme, influence, is a unique quality of leadership. Practically all definitions of leadership indicate that it is a process of influencing others to achieve a common goal. This means that leadership is a process of achieving organizational goals, but through influence rather than through managerial activities. At this point, it is sufficient to note that management and leadership encompass distinct qualities: the organization and implementation of goal attainment materials versus the use of influence in achieving goals. These qualities may overlap in practice, as explained in later sections of this article, but the distinction between them should be well recognized to avoid confusion. This entanglement between man-

agement and leadership will be clarified in the subsequent sections for greater clarity between the two forms of headship.

4.2. Status Formality and Legitimacy

A significant difference between management and leadership lies in the nature of a manager's versus a leader's status. This difference primarily concerns formality and legitimacy. Every organization has a structure that comprises all its parts, including the arrangement of divisions, departments, and all work units within the organization (Gibson et al., 2012; Tolbert & Hall, 2016). All positions within an organization are strategically placed within the organization's structure to ensure the effective and efficient attainment of the organization's goals (Gibson et al., 2012). Among these positions are management at various levels spanning the length of the organization. By organizational imperative, the taller an organizational structure is, the larger the number of management positions the organization uses to accomplish its goals (Gibson et al., 2012; Tolbert & Hall, 2016). Because each management position is rationally designed (by expectation) and backed by organizational authority, Max Weber referred to them as rational-legal positions of authority (Weber, 1947).

As rational-legal positions, management is formally established and assigned to specific locations of authority within an organizational structure to perform designated duties. The positions are observable on organizational charts, which include titles such as Chairman, CEO, President, Vice President, Chancellor, Executive Director, Senior Manager, Dean, Manager, or Supervisor (Oyinlade, 2025). They are formally and legitimately recognized positions that carry specified responsibilities assigned to each, and individuals are hired to occupy these positions to fulfill their assigned duties (Merton, 1936). Therefore, a management position and the manager are formal statuses within an organization, and they gain legitimacy from organizational bureaucracy. This means that as organizational needs change and necessitate structural redesign, management positions may be formally recreated, increased, or eliminated, and the manager serves at the pleasure of organizational necessities.

Unlike management and managers, who are formal constituents of the organizational structure, being a leader is an informal status; hence, it is absent from organizational charts. Because management positions are formally specified in organizational structures, they appear in organizational charts by title. And when hiring, organizations post job advertisements that specify management positions to be filled, such as "Manager Wanted" or "Coach Wanted," but not "Leader Wanted" (Oyinlade, 2025). This distinction is important because, in a practical sense, while a manager can be hired, a leader cannot, as leadership is an informal process of influencing others, and an influencing process cannot be hired (Oyinlade, 2025).

A leader is someone who accomplishes organizational goals by relying on influence rather than a job position and its accompanying authority. A manager

who influences workers, rather than relying on a managerial position and authority, has become a leader. Being a leader is based on informal human relations that yield influence with others, rather than a formal bureaucratic position within an organizational structure that is subject to change through organizational redesign. Simultaneously, remaining a leader depends on the ability to sustain good informal human relations that will continue to influence others to achieve goals (Oy-inlade, 2025). While this discussion centers on managers becoming leaders, being a manager may not be necessary to be a leader, so long as one informally influences others to accomplish an objective (Oy-inlade, 2025).

4.3. Goal Orientation and Assignment

Organizations exist to accomplish goals that an individual cannot achieve acting alone (Gibson et al., 2012; Ivancevich et al., 2014). To achieve its ultimate goals of success and survival, an organization is designed with a structure that contains various divisions and units to which the organization's goals are assigned, as well as the necessary bureaucracy to accomplish these goals (Ivancevich et al., 2014; Tolbert & Hall, 2016). Since each organizational unit is headed by a manager, the goals of each unit are assigned to the manager, who then designs the unit's protocols or bureaucracy to achieve the assigned goals (Brevis, 2014).

The assignment of goals to units and unit heads is a formal organizational behavior and a requisite for accomplishing organizational goals (Brevis, 2014). Therefore, organizational goals are officially assigned to managers, not leaders. In fact, because leadership is only the process of using influence to achieve goals, only managers can be formally assigned organizational goals for unit achievement. The manager is the individual who appears in an organizational structure as responsible for attaining organizational goals through efficient and effective use of organizational resources (Barnard, 1968; Gardner, 2000). The manager is the person whose job is to create the conditions under which work will be done, and done well through effective actions (Paton, 1991). But, while the manager is the official position to which organizational goals are assigned, it is important to remain cognizant of leadership as a form of headship that is also goal-oriented. By definition, the point of leadership is to achieve organizational goals. That is, like management, the purpose of leadership is to facilitate goal attainment. This means that organizational goals can be achieved either through managerial practice or through leadership influence (or both). Keeping in mind that leadership cannot be assigned goals, leadership essentially becomes a method for achieving managerial goals. The influencing quality of leadership, an informal process, serves to accomplish organizational goals assigned to managers. Hence, a manager is officially assigned goals that may or may not be accomplished with leadership influence (Oy-inlade, 2025).

How organizational goals are achieved, whether through managerial or leadership behaviors, may be nuanced by the type of goal. Typically, instrumental organizational goals are assigned to unit heads. These goals are the ultimate reasons

for organizational existence; hence, they must be efficiently achieved for an organization to stay in business (Parsons, 1966; Paton, 1991). They are also the primary reason for hiring managers and their subordinates (Oyinlade, 2025). For example, a manufacturing company must manufacture goods and sell them to stay in business; therefore, it must distribute the various work necessary to manufacture and sell its products to its various units and managers. The key expectation from the managers is to conduct specific activities and achieve specific penultimate goals that contribute to the achievement of the organization's ultimate goals of manufacturing and selling. Whether the manager employs managerial methods or leadership influence to achieve assigned instrumental goals is not as important as ensuring that the goals are accomplished and how effectively they are achieved. Because how well instrumental goals are achieved has great consequences for organizational survival, it forms the criteria upon which the effectiveness of managers is measured and the basis for rewarding both managers and their command groups (Oyinlade, 2025).

While instrumental goals can be achieved through either managerial or leadership approaches, expressive goals are purely within the domain of leadership behavior. These goals focus purely on the well-being of workers (Parsons, 1966; Paton, 1991); hence, they are only indirectly germane to employee effectiveness and workgroup productivity. They include creating a friendly work environment, fostering a supportive work environment, minimizing unhealthy competition and conflicts among coworkers, and promoting solidarity among workers both in and outside the workplace (see Herzberg et al., 1959). Expressive roles may also include creating a humorous work environment, preventing hurtful behaviors and soothing hurtful feelings when they occur, and encouraging camaraderie among workers (Crossman, 2020). In addition, expressive roles may cater to the mental health of workers by showing concern for reported health issues, assisting employees in accessing needed medical care, and helping them alleviate workplace stress (Oyinlade, 2025). As may be evident with the stated examples, expressive goals focus on recognizing workers as whole persons who have mental and social connectedness needs that should be achieved alongside instrumental goals. These needs can be classified as either humanitarian or employee-centered, and achieving them requires exceptional human relations skills and sensitivity, which are essential components of leadership competencies (Oyinlade, 2025).

In short, managers and leaders share a similarity in that they are both goal-oriented; however, their approaches to achieving goals and the types of goals they pursue differ. A manager is the official entity to which official instrumental unit goals are assigned. These goals can be achieved either through managerial methods or by utilizing leadership influence, if the manager has developed into a leader. Expressive goals, however, are typically not assigned or specified as needed goals for managers to achieve, but they are a necessary component of employees' motivation to work and persist with an organization (see Seeman, 1959; see also Allen & Meyer, 1990). They are not the responsibility of managers who have not become

leaders, but those who have transformed into leaders achieve these goals and gain influence that is used to accomplish their managerial assignments.

4.4. Power Base for Goal Attainment

Another important distinction between managers and leaders is the power base that they use to accomplish unit goals. A power base refers to what someone controls that gives the person power over others (Gibson et al., 2012; Ivancevic et al., 2014). This can also be loosely interpreted as sources of power. The power base that managers control is distinct from that of leaders. What managers control is the office. The position they occupy is assigned power, which they control; hence, they have power through office. This occurs because for an organization to function effectively, it must distribute power in the form of authority to each position based on the level and responsibilities of each position within the organizational structure (Fayol, 1949; Ivancevic et al., 2014; Tolbert & Hall, 2016). This means that the amount of authority assigned to each organizational position is unavoidable and varies by rank. Hence, managers are assigned the necessary authority to conduct their work, primarily including planning, design, task assignment, coordination, supervision, and assessment, within their respective command groups. This is authorized power, as defined by organizational bureaucracy (Barnard, 1968; Weber, 1947), and the higher a management position is in an organizational structure, the greater the authorized power available to the manager (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980).

As a result of the authorized power for job accomplishments, managers are bureaucratically expected to use and rely on this authority to compel their subordinates to perform as instructed. The ability to compel subordinates to work as instructed can be attributed to the top-down nature of authorized power that demands obedience from workers (Barnard, 1968; Fayol, 1949; Weber, 1947) and the workers' training, structural expectations, and societal cultural socialization that have conditioned them to obey their managers (Oyinlade, 2025). In addition, the exercise of authorized power is backed by a manager's ability to use sanctions to compel obedience and elicit desired performance from subordinates. Sanctions are rewards for conformity and punishments for non-conformity (Watson, 1930). According to behaviorism theory, people learn to repeat behaviors that lead to rewards and avoid those that result in punishment (Watson, 1930); hence, managers can use sanctions appropriately to achieve a desired level of performance or productivity. This attests to three approaches that managers may use to get desired performance: 1) Subordinates are forced to grant their managers a zone of indifference in which managerial authorized power can be exercised (Fayol, 1949; Weber, 1947), 2) managerial authorized power is expected to be obeyed as laws, like citizens obey laws, without room for personal discretions regarding what to obey or not obey (Postema, 2001; Sevel, 2018), and 3) obedient compliance from subordinates is the only acceptable response to managerial authorized power even when subordinates hold different opinions from their managers or even wish to

resist their authority (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975). In essence, based on organizational design, managers compel others to work by force through sanctions—behave as instructed and get a reward, or disobey and face punishments, which may include dismissal.

In comparison to managers, leaders do not have authorized power because leadership is not an official bureaucratic position in an organizational structure, as earlier explained. It is the process of influencing followers that determines the informal status of a leader, based on the workers (subordinates) who have voluntarily become followers and, at the same time, have ordained the manager as their leader (Oyinlade, 2025). This means that *the only power a leader has is the influence* granted by followers. This is endorsed power (Etzioni, 1965). It is rooted in the willingness of followers to align their interests with those of the leader due to the positive (or endearing) interpersonal relationship they have with him/her (Barnard, 1968; Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Etzioni, 1965).

Given that endorsed power is influence gifted to the leader by the followers (formerly subordinates), it is non-coercive. In fact, unlike management, leadership cannot be coercive because the endorsed power of influence upon which leadership is based depends fully on the willingness of followers to grant it based on the leader's positive interpersonal relations with the followers. It also affirms that leadership and its accompanying power base of influence are bestowed by followers as emergent phenomena (Meindl et al., 1985), and leaders must maintain positive interpersonal relationships with followers to retain their endorsed power and influence (Wolinski, 2023). While it may be argued that leaders may reward followers for their followership, the point being made here is that followers grant endorsed power and are influenced by the leader, neither for rewards nor due to fear of punishment (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

With dependence only on endorsed power to stimulate employee performance, leaders can only employ inspirational appeals and rational persuasions to influence their followers to work. With inspirational appeals, leaders are able to create excitement and enthusiasm, as well as arouse positive emotions that energize followers to perform their tasks effectively. And, through rational persuasions, leaders use logic and evidence to generate convictions for high performance (Yukl et al., 1992). Therefore, without resorting to the use of authorized power like managers, leaders rely on human relations skills to create motivating job environments that provide workers with intrinsic reasons to work and achieve collective goals (Pride et al., 2008).

4.5. Command Group Relationships

Workers who report to someone (span of control) constitute the person's command group (Fayol, 1949; Gibson et al., 2012). The relationship between the command group members and the group head provides another important distinction between a manager and a leader, and why the two concepts should not be interchanged. Two such relationships exist: manager-subordinate and leader-follower

relationships.

4.5.1. Manager-Subordinate Relationship

To be a manager is to have subordinates (those who report to the manager based on organizational structure) and maintain a relationship with them that is characterized by a manager-subordinate dynamic (Thompson, 2021). This is a crucial distinction between being a manager and being a leader. Both the statuses of the manager and the subordinate are formal, and they are required rational-legal positions for accomplishing organizational instrumental goals (Oyinlade, 2025). This also means that the relationship between the two positions is formal and bureaucratic by manifest design. This characteristic logically follows from the power base for goal attainment and defines the nature of the manager-subordinate relationship. The relationship is formal and defined by reporting lines and job descriptions (Thompson, 2021). The relationship requires a subordinate to follow instructions from the manager and complete assignments as specified. The manager has the official responsibility to coordinate and control the actions of the subordinate (Fayol, 1949). Expectations of subordinates for performance are outlined in an organization's employee handbook and enforced by the manager. It does not matter whether subordinates like their managers or not, they are compelled by organizational bureaucracy to perform assigned duties to the satisfaction of the managers (Fayol, 1949; Oyinlade, 2025). However, subordinates also work and obey managerial directives for their own self-interests, especially financial and any other personal goals they may have.

4.5.2. Leader-Follower Relationship

Unlike managers who have subordinates, leaders have and maintain relationships with followers (Chen & Zhao, 2024; Etzioni, 1965). To follow is to align "one's thoughts, preferences, and actions with those of another person, the leader, based on high regard and affective reverence for the person and without any inducement or expectations of rewards or threat of punishment" (Oyinlade, 2025: pp. 161-162). Unlike the manager-subordinate relationship, which is formally prescribed and mandated by organizational bureaucracy, the leader-follower relationship is informal and exists on the condition that a manager has become a leader and a subordinate has transformed into a follower (Chen & Zhao 2024; Oyinlade, 2025). Being a follower is a voluntary status that a subordinate self-assigns based on a manager's positive human relations that emphasize expressive activities to achieve both expressive and instrumental goals of a unit. Chen and Zhao (2024) emphasize that followership is a relational dynamic based on voluntary commitment, trust, and emotional connection to the leader's vision. This voluntary aspect is a hallmark of leadership, distinguishing it from the obligatory relationship inherent in a managerial hierarchy.

When subordinates have accepted a manager as their leader, they transform into followers and make the manager their leader. This implies that, unlike the manager whose position is ordained by organizational structure and imposed on

subordinates, only those who have become followers see the manager as a leader and maintain a leader-follower relationship. That is, while organizations determine who becomes a manager over subordinates, it is the followers who determine who they follow; hence, they choose who becomes their leader. So, one does not become a leader until someone decides to willingly and voluntarily follow (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). For example, in a command group of seven subordinates, four may remain subordinates while the other three have become followers and treat the manager as their leader. The four subordinates will view the group head only as their manager and maintain a traditional manager-subordinate relationship with him/her. However, the three followers will see the manager as a leader and mutually cultivate a leader-follower relationship (see Oyinlade, 2025). This means that everyone in a command group is, by organizational mandate, a subordinate to the organizationally appointed manager, but who becomes a follower is at the discretion of the workers (see Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It is possible that all the subordinates become followers, and it is also likely that only a few or even none of them become followers. Therefore, one may or may not be a leader to everyone in a command group. Because followership is informal, leadership is also informal, and the leader-follower relationship is likewise informal. This means that leadership is typically not explicitly declared or stated, but rather, “it is subtly demonstrated through the actions of followers” (Oyinlade, 2025: p. 163). Follower behaviors and their consequences are discussed below under command group performance outcomes.

4.6. Command Group Performance Outcomes

Ultimately, whether one is a manager or a leader, performance, measured by command group output, is a key distinguishing factor between the two forms of headship. As mentioned earlier, both management and leadership are goal-oriented, but they achieve their goals through different approaches, which produce varied and disparate outcomes (Oyinlade, 2025). Based on their approaches, leaders have been claimed to outperform managers. This is primarily due to the differences in the characteristics of management and leadership skills and competencies, which are largely outside the scope of this study. Support for such claims can be found in studies such as Bass (1990), Bass and Bass (2008), Mumford et al. (2002), Mumford et al. (2017), Yukl (2006, 2008, 2011), and Zaccaro (2014). Caution is, however, recommended in interpreting the conclusions reached in these studies due to their interchange of leadership and management, which can lead to a lack of clarity regarding the exact influence of leadership versus management on performance. But some explanations can be drawn from the factors discussed in this study as determinants of the differential command group outputs under a manager versus a leader.

As explained earlier, managers are official positions imposed on subordinates. Organizations determine who becomes managers and subordinates, and managers are able to use authorized power to get compliance from subordinates. Man-

agers can demand a zone of indifference or acceptance from subordinates, within which they (managers) can use organizational rewards and punishments to achieve the necessary levels of performance. The “Zone of Indifference” and the “Zone of Acceptance” are foundational to understanding authority and subordinate compliance in organizations. Both ideas describe the boundaries within which employees willingly accept directives from an authority figure. While often used interchangeably, they originate from different theorists—Chester Barnard and Herbert Simon—and carry nuanced distinctions that remain relevant in contemporary research.

In 1938, Chester Barnard introduced the concept of the “zone of indifference” in his major work, *The Functions of the Executive*. He defined it as the range of orders within which a subordinate is willing to accept directives without consciously questioning their legitimacy. According to Barnard, authority does not reside in the person giving the order but in the subordinate’s willingness to comply. For orders to fall within this zone, they must be perceived by the subordinate as consistent with the organization’s purposes, compatible with their personal interests, and mentally and physically feasible to carry out (Barnard, 1938). Nine years later, Herbert Simon (1947) built upon Barnard’s idea but termed it the “zone of acceptance” in his work, *Administrative Behavior*. Simon’s formulation emphasizes the employee’s deliberate choice. He explained that workers enter an employment contract with the understanding that they will accept a certain range of authority in exchange for remuneration. Within this predefined zone, the subordinate suspends his/her own critical judgment and allows organizational authority to guide his/her behavior (Simon, 1947; Chen & Zhao, 2024).

Managerial methods, by organizational bureaucratic design, are coercive since punishments are meted out to poorly performing subordinates, and such punishments may include dismissal (Oyinlade, 2025). As a result of managerial methods, subordinates perform within their zones of indifference, and so long as they meet unit performance requirements, the manager maintains the subordinates’ zones of indifference (Barnard, 1968). It is also possible for managers to force subordinates to increase productivity through financial incentives or authoritarian threats of punishment (Li et al., 2018; Karakitapoglu-Aygün et al., 2021), but these methods are likely to increase employee unhappiness, job dissatisfaction, and turnover. The least dysfunctional outcome of forcing the expansion of the zone of indifference is continual commitment, whereby the worker temporarily remains with an organization until a better job is secured (see Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Oyinlade & Christo, 2020). Therefore, at best, managerial efforts are productive to the extent that they maintain subordinates’ zones of indifference.

The advantage of leadership for command group productivity is multipronged. First, we should remember that being a leader is based on a positive human relations approach of interacting with workers such that they become followers and make the manager their leader. Leadership is informal, and the leader gets the command group to perform using influence as endorsed power (Etzioni, 1965). Fol-

lowers willingly and voluntarily expand their zones of indifference (Barnard, 1968) or acceptance (Simon, 1997) as they align their interests with those of their ordained leader (Etzioni, 1965). By expanding their zones of indifference, they are willing to go with the leader's choices (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and produce extraordinary performance without being required to do so. They do so out of affective relations with the leader and the fact that they chose to make the manager their leader (Katz & Kahn, 1978). They willingly and voluntarily work harder and increase their performance not for extra rewards or out of fear of punishment, but rather because the leader has influenced them through endearing interpersonal relations (Oyinlade, 2025).

When subordinates perform within their zones of indifference under a manager, it does not mean they are not capable of greater performance. They perform within their zones of indifference because that is what managerial behavior requires of them. However, under leadership, followers are able to self-actualize due to the encouraging work environment created by the leader. Conditions created by the leader that stimulate self-actualization may include enhancing employee job satisfaction and motivation (see Seeman, 1959), fostering functional competition among followers (Vasilescu, 2019), and promoting organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Oyinlade & Christo, 2020).

The likelihood that leadership influence produces employee self-actualization, extraordinary employee performance, and organizational commitment is a major advantage of leadership over management, even when management may sufficiently meet organizational goals. Ultimately, the most significant performance differentiator lies in the concept of discretionary effort—the willingness to go “above and beyond” formal job requirements. Subordinates typically perform tasks as prescribed, focusing on role compliance and adherence. Followers, however, engage in proactive behaviors that drive superior outcomes. Evidence of the leader advantage can be drawn from many studies, among them are Lee and Park (2023), Garcia and Ibrahim (2024), Thompson et al. (2022).

A longitudinal study by Lee and Park (2023) tracked software development teams and found that teams characterized by follower relationships (measured by high levels of trust in the team lead and belief in the project's vision) demonstrated 34 percent more positive organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), such as helping colleagues and improving work processes without being asked. These teams also showed a 22 percent higher rate of on-time project completion compared to teams with a traditional subordinate-manager dynamic. The researchers concluded that “the psychological engagement inherent in followership directly translates into proactive problem-solving, whereas subordinate relationships foster a more reactive, compliance-based approach” (Lee & Park, 2023: p. 112). Also, research by Garcia and Ibrahim (2024) in the pharmaceutical industry examined R&D teams. They found that teams led by leaders who empowered members and fostered a shared sense of purpose (follower dynamic) generated 50 percent more viable patent applications than teams with a more directive, control-based man-

agement style (subordinate dynamic). The key mechanism was psychological safety. As Garcia and Ibrahim (2024) stated, “When individuals see themselves as followers of a mission rather than subordinates to a boss, they are more likely to contribute unconventional ideas and engage in constructive debate, which are the lifeblood of innovation” (p. 208). In a subordinate culture, the primary goal is to avoid error; in a follower culture, the goal is to achieve breakthrough (Garcia & Ibrahim, 2024). In addition, a study by Thompson et al. (2022) analyzed organizational responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. They surveyed service-industry employees who were forced to transition to remote work. The findings revealed that employees who reported to “leaders” (described by traits such as communication of vision and empathy) rather than just “managers” (described by traits such as task assignment and monitoring) showed 40 percent higher levels of adaptive performance. These employees proactively found new ways to serve customers, collaborated effectively digitally, and maintained higher productivity. In contrast, teams of subordinates experienced a significant decline in performance and required more frequent and specific directives from management to function. Thompson et al. (2022) argued that “followership provides an internalized compass that guides behavior in the absence of direct supervision, making organizations more agile and resilient” (p. 91). Essentially, followership is the primary way employees affectively expand their zones of indifference and boost performance by reducing transaction costs through less need for job clarification and absence of pushback on task assignments (Barnard, 1938). When employees become followers, they readily accept directives; hence, less time and energy are spent on justification, negotiation, and monitoring, which improves coordination efficiency and accelerates job execution (Barnard, 1938; Malone & Crowston, 1994). These outcomes align with the Coordination Theory which postulates that clear authority structures and efficient communication reduce the transaction costs associated with independent work processes, thereby improving organizational responsiveness (Malone & Crowston, 1994).

5. Why Does It Matter?

5.1. Detriments of Conflation

One may wonder why it matters how headship is labeled—whether as a manager or a leader—in organizations, especially since both are geared toward achieving organizational goals. On the surface, the distinction between the two labels may seem trivial, but a closer analysis of the concepts reveals some detriments to both leadership and the potential benefits of leadership to organizations.

As explained by Oyinlade (2025), when distinctions are not made between management and leadership, the two concepts are equated with one another. They become one, and the meaning of leadership is compromised or completely lost. It implies that once a person becomes a manager, he/she has become a leader; hence, the skills and competencies that managers must acquire before becoming leaders become redundant. The benefits of positive interpersonal human relations that

leaders acquire, which culminate in endorsed power to influence followers to expand their zones of indifference for extraordinary job performance, are also nullified. In addition, leadership development becomes unnecessary and can no longer be justified.

The conflation of management with leadership is also detrimental to leadership development, as it automatically assumes that managers are leaders. If it is automatic that managers are leaders, the call for leaders will not be made by corporate elites and consultants, unless it is argued that their calls were in error. As [Peters and Austin \(1985\)](#) decried and as [Benton \(1998\)](#) cited regarding the words of boards of directors, what we need in American corporations are leaders, not managers. Additionally, in support of a design to make US schools more competitive on the global stage, Les Stein emphasized that schools needed leaders, not managers, and it was time for a paradigm shift ([Stein, 2016](#)). These claims underscore the importance of distinguishing between leaders and managers, as they should not be conflated, because harnessing the benefits of leadership is crucial for organizational success.

5.2. Management-Leadership Conundrum

Just as it is essential to distinguish between management and leadership to foster leadership development and capitalize on its benefits, it is equally crucial to address a conundrum related to the intersection of management and leadership. The conundrum lies in the likely co-presence (or an intersection) of the two headship forms in one person, indicating that being a leader does not necessarily erase being a manager, although being a manager may exist independently of being a leader. This is because managers do not have to become leaders to have productive and successful command groups, so long as they maintain their subordinates' zones of indifference. However, when subordinates become followers and choose their manager as their leader, both the manager and the leader reside in the same person. In this situation, the workgroup head controls both bureaucratic managerial authority (i.e., authorized power) and influence (i.e., endorsed power) bestowed by followers. It may be confusing for non-members of the command group to correctly determine which status the group's head is occupying at any given time. This difficulty may become exponential when the command group head is perceived by some members as a manager and by others as a leader. It may also be more confusing when the individual oscillates between authorized and endorsed power use and simultaneously rotates his/her status between manager and leader. This may easily facilitate the conflation of management with leadership.

The inability to readily know when a command group head is a manager or a leader is where the conundrum mostly exists, judging from the above analysis. However, this does not invalidate the fact that the two forms of headship should not be conflated. As [Oyinlade \(2025\)](#) suggests, it is best to recognize unit heads only as managers unless one is certain they have followers, in which case they can legitimately be addressed as leaders. Since organizational heads are, by structural

design, foremost managers, their managerial status is their most accurate and legitimate identity. Therefore, it is best to address the manager simply as manager rather than as leader. The same is true for all levels of organizational supervision, including the board chairman/woman, president, and all high-level corporate executives. It is equally appropriate to use the term “management team” rather than “leadership team” because there is certainty only in the fact that members of such teams have subordinates, not followers. So, at the generic level, unless one is a follower of the head of a team, it is most correct to address the person as a manager. As one source puts it, “management as a group refers to all those persons who perform the tasks of managing an enterprise. When we say that the management of ABC Company is good, we are referring to a group of people who are managing the company. Thus, as a group, technically speaking, management will include all managers, from the chief executive to the first-line level managers. But in common practice, reference to management tends to imply only top management, i.e., Chief Executive Officer, Chairman, General Manager, Board of Directors, etc. In other words, management tends to be applied to those who make important decisions, who enjoy the authority to allocate resources, and who have responsibility for the efficient utilization of resources to efficiently accomplish organizational objectives. Managers as a group may be perceived in two different ways: all managers taken together, regardless of level of management, or just top managers” (*Management Basics*, 2024, online).

6. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study is to bring to the surface and raise awareness of the importance of distinguishing between management and leadership and to encourage both scholars and organizational heads to be fully cognizant of the two forms of headship without conflating them. In the process, six main criteria were used to adequately distinguish between the two. Further distinctions between them are also possible by comparing the leadership characteristics outlined by Fayol (1949) with the leadership competencies mentioned by many scholars (such as Ajuwon & Oyinlade, 2016; Conger, 1992; Oyinlade, 2025; Oyinlade, 2006; Oyinlade et al., 2003; Peters & Austin, 1985; Sinek, 2017; Stein, 2016; Stogdill, 1974; Vasilescu, 2019; Wolinski, 2023).

What is at stake, and what this article aims to highlight, are the detrimental consequences of conflating management, specifically managers, with leadership, specifically leaders. Corporations commonly send their managers to leadership workshops for the purpose of acquiring leadership competencies because of the benefits of having such skills (Oyinlade, 2025). This means much more must be consciously learned to become a leader beyond being promoted to management positions.

When a unit head occupies a formal management position, performs managerial functions, relies on authorized power to get obedient job compliance, maintains a manager-subordinate relationship with command group members, main-

tains the zones of indifference of command group members, and obtains only expected levels of performance rather than extraordinary output from the command group, such person is a manager and should be recognized as such, rather than as a leader. The unique influencing quality of leadership is lost when managers are automatically addressed as leaders. They falsely perceive themselves as leaders when they are only managers, and this false impression undermines the necessary human relations skills they need to develop to influence workers to self-actualize. Consequently, managers fail to achieve exceptional performance from their workers because they are ineffective in encouraging workers to become engaged and intrinsically motivated. As a result, organizations become the greatest losers for not realizing the full potential of their workers.

It is highly recommended that organizational officers, especially higher-level executives, become sensitive to the misuse of the terms 'leader' and 'leadership,' and invest in their managers to develop leadership competencies, so that they truly become leaders after gaining followership from their subordinates. This is when being called leaders becomes appropriate and beneficial to the organization, as workers willingly and happily expand their zones of indifference and raise their output to extraordinary levels.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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