

# Leadership Role Models Across Contexts: Identifying Common Similarities and Differences

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**Abstract:** Although role models are widely acknowledged as important in leadership development, little is known about the defining traits of leader role models. This study aims to address this gap by developing a cross-organizational framework of characteristics that define role models in the field of observational leadership development. Drawing on a multiple case study design, three distinct types of organizational career trajectories were selected as cases for analysis: (1) careers rooted in management consultancies, (2) careers situated within corporate firms, and (3) careers involving a crossover from consulting to corporate settings. The primary focus is placed on management consultancies, as their unique setting creates an environment conducive to the observation of the salient attributes of leader role models. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and future research directions. The study contributes to the extant literature on leadership development and role models, offering valuable practical and theoretical implications.

**Keywords:** Leadership development, Role models, Management consultancies, Case study

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## 1. Introduction

The study of leadership development has attracted increasing scholarly interest and evolved into a distinct academic discipline (Day et al, 2014). While research has demonstrated the significant impact of role models on the leadership development of individuals (Vuhuong and Edwards, 2022), little attention has been paid to the content of role modelling itself and the attributes of role models in leadership studies. The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating core characteristics that define leader role models in the field of observational leadership development, with a particular emphasis on management consultancies, given their distinctive environment.

Distinguished by multifaceted leadership exposure, frequent reconfigurations of teams and client interactions, management consultancies provide a particular fertile ground for observing leader role models in action. Unlike corporate firms, where the production does not include significant amounts of non-human resources, such as inventories, factories and equipment (Nordenflycht, 2010), management consultancies are characterized by the core asset being intangible, not directly owned or controlled by the firm, but embodied in its professionals (Empson, 2020). Given this human-centric model, the development of professionals plays a pivotal role. Yet, formal leadership training is often sparse in management consultancies (Smets et al, 2017), rather leadership behaviors are learned informally, often by observing role models (Empson and Langley, 2017).

This study investigates core characteristics and key traits of role models that facilitate such observational learning in leadership. Based on a multiple case study design, it integrates interview data from three distinct types of organizational career trajectories selected as cases to develop a cross-organizational taxonomy of attributes that characterize role models in the field of leadership development. This study advances the current understanding of leadership development and role models with both practical and theoretical insights.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Role Models

Throughout history, models of every kind have played a crucial role in shaping an individual's growth and development (Scarnati, 2002). The term "role model" first appeared in 1973 in the literature of most fields (Speizer, 1981) and encompasses the notion of "roles", which refer to behavioral patterns associated with specific status positions, and the process of "modeling", which involves the alignment of cognitive skills and behaviors between an observer and a target (Gibson, 2003).

#### 2.1.1 Definitions

The prevailing definition of a role model at this time was as a person who possesses skills and displays techniques that an individual lacks, and from whom an individual could learn through observation and comparison with one's own performance (Speizer, 1981). Since then, various definitions have been proposed.

Cunningham and Eberle (1993) defined role models as influential persons, who exhibit behavior, skills, and styles which individuals wish to emulate. Higgins and Thomas (2001) designate role models as "developers" and delineate the latter as an individual who holds a more senior organizational position and is working in the same organization as the protégé. Another definition is proposed by Gibson and Barron (2003) who define role models as "person(s) an individual perceives to be similar to some extent, and because of that similarity, the individuals desires to emulate (or specifically avoid) aspects of that person's attributes or behavior's" (p. 199).

Such definitions of role models are quite similar, with an emphasis on learning through observation and emulation. They are thus very similar to Bandura's conceptualization of models in his theory of social learning, which constitutes one of the two primary psychological theories that provide the foundation for the study of role models (Gibson, 2003). Social learning theory posits that individuals observe and attend to models who help them learn new tasks, skills, attitudes, and norms (Bandura, 1971). Identification theory, the second foundation, extends this by emphasizing the emotional and cognitive connection individuals form with role models they perceive as similar (Slater, 1961). Both theories highlight the selection of role models from an individual's social environment and the process of understanding their influence by observing their thoughts and behaviors.

### *2.1.2 Selection of role models*

The selection of role models can be seen as a social comparison process. When individuals are motivated to self-improve, they select social references who inhibit these desired behaviors (Ibarra, 1999). Ibarra (2000) posits that the selection of a role model is predicated on several criteria: effectiveness, i.e. the question of whether the role model is successful; feasibility, i.e. whether the role model's behavior could work for the individual; and attractiveness, i.e. whether the role model's persona is appealing to the individual and if the individual wishes to emulate the role model. In addition to these factors, Cunningham and Eberle (1993) emphasized the pivotal role of accessibility in the selection of role models. As a further criterion in the process of role model selection, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) added attainability, which entailed an evaluation of whether the success of the role model appeared to be within a realistic reach for the individual. In summary, the basis of role model selection is whether individuals (1) find a role model relevant to their own needs and goals, (2) view the role model's position or expertise as successful and potentially attainable, and (3) perceive the role model as accessible and available for personal development.

### *2.1.3 Identification*

As role models play a pivotal role in the development of an individual's skills and identity (Ibarra, 1999), an additional fundamental component of the selection process is the identification, which refers to the perceived similarity between an individual and their role model. Identification can be thought of as a psychological connection with a role model, where an individual internalizes the role model's influence on their thoughts, actions, and values (Aronson, 1999). This internalization is driven by the perception of the role model as attractive or appealing in representing a goal that the individual would like to attain (Gibson, 2004). The strength of this identification is assessed by the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be similar to the role model (Gibson and Barron, 2003).

### *2.1.4 Multiple role models*

Instead of conforming to a single role model, Ibarra (2000) revealed, that individuals tend to observe multiple role models, selectively adopting aspects of their behaviors to create and construct an ideal self. The integration of specific attributes from multiple role models to create a composite global role model involves constructing a representation of an individual's desired future self, combining characteristics and behaviors drawn from various influential figures (Gibson, 2003). This finding aligns with Higgins and Thomas (2001) who posited that having multiple developmental relationships is thought to be a more effective strategy for individuals than focusing on a limited number of dominant people. Also, Gibson and Barron (2003) found that individuals benefit from multiple, rather than one predominant fostering interaction which suggests that a greater range and diversity of relationships increases the quality and variety of information available to individuals, increasing their chances of career advancement. This is due to the fact that multiple role models can provide a portfolio of varied skills, rather than one homogenous package (Ibarra, 1999). Therefore, the concept of a singular, overarching role model was eschewed in favor of a more nuanced approach, whereby specific lessons were derived from a variety of role models, encompassing both positive and negative examples (Gibson, 2003).

## **2.2 Role Models in Leadership Development**

Leadership development is often viewed as an individual endeavor, focusing on traits and behaviors (Day et al, 2014). Building on the foundational work of Day (2000), researchers have explored various perspectives, including experiential learning (McCall, 2004), developmental trajectories (Lord and Hall, 2005), the role of social capital (Bilhuber Galli and Müller-Stewens, 2012), and the influence of temporal dynamics and hierarchical levels on leadership growth (Day and Dragoni, 2015). In addition, research on leadership training (Lacerenza et al, 2017), development programs (Vongswasdi et al, 2023), and adult learning processes (Scholtz, 2023, 2024) has deepened our understanding of leadership development.

Leadership development is defined as a social process that builds human capital, i.e. enhancing individual skills and knowledge (Day, 2000), and social capital, i.e. fostering relationships, trust, and networks (Grandy and Holton, 2013). It evolves through interpersonal interactions and relational dynamics that shape leadership capabilities over time (Day, 2000). Despite the substantial body of knowledge already available, the extant literature still does not fully explain how leadership is learned. A key aspect of leadership development involves learning within social and organizational contexts (Day, 2000), including approaches such as action learning (Bilhuber Galli and Müller-Stewens, 2012), and experiential learning (Scholtz, 2024). Kempster (2006) posited that a pivotal component of leadership learning occurs within a variety of contexts and situations that facilitate learning through observation. While leadership development is not limited to formal training but rather unfolds as a complex and gradual social process, only a few studies have examined leadership learning in informal, multilevel settings, such as learning based on observing others (Kempster and Cope, 2010; Vuhuong and Edwards, 2022).

Role models have a considerable impact on the leadership development of individuals (Vuhuong and Edwards, 2022). It is often the case that individuals anchor their learning about leadership from their experience with notable persons, a process that is fundamental to the shaping of leadership perspectives (Kempster, 2006). The influence of role models is amplified when they are observed vicariously, whether or not there is actual interaction. This suggests that role modelling can serve as an important alternative to more traditional forms of leadership development (Gibson and Barron, 2003).

One essential outcome of leadership development is the leader identity (Day and Harrison, 2007), which is a subcomponent of one's overall identity specific to leadership (Miscenko et al, 2017), and represents an individuals' self-perception as a leader (Day and Dragoni, 2015).

The development of leadership capabilities extends beyond the individual growth of leaders, requiring the incorporation of organizational contexts. In order to take into account the importance of context in leadership (Johns, 2024), this study investigates role models with a primary focus on a specific organizational setting: Management Consultancies.

## **2.3 Leadership Development in the Context of Management Consultancies**

The context of management consultancies offers a particularly well suited and distinctive setting to identify the constitution of role models in the process of leadership development. Unlike corporate firms, management consultancies operate with different structural and career dynamics that influence the acquisition and development of leadership capabilities. The nature of consulting work – characterized by project-based assignments, high client interaction, and frequent team changes (Nour et al, 2017) – creates an environment where individuals are continuously exposed to multiple potential role models at various hierarchical levels (Smets et al, 2012).

Consultants engage in short-term, customized, one-off projects, which generally extend across a few weeks to months. Each new project includes varied team compositions and leadership dynamics (Noury et al, 2017). This setting fosters continuous exposure to a variety of role models, enabling individuals to observe and internalize different leadership behaviors. As such, role models are a central aspect of leadership development in management consultancies. Also, the pyramid shaped organizational structure provides professionals with exposure to a variety of role models and leadership dynamics (Smets et al, 2012), facilitating the internalization of diverse leadership behaviors.

In contrast to conventional corporate firms, where investment in leadership development is prevalent (Bilhuber Galli and Müller-Stewens, 2012), management consultancies endeavor to enhance the expertise of the consultants by prioritizing the development of human capital in the form of technical training (Smets et al,

2017). Leadership skills, however, are primarily developed by observing successful role models within the work environment (Empson and Langley, 2017), as the following interview statements from consultants indicate:

*There were no training sessions at all on the topic of leadership (MC-8)*

*A lot was simply observed. I mean, how the partners do it (MC-12)*

Consequently, many consultants progress to more senior roles without receiving adequate formal guidance from their organization (Ibarra, 1999). Therefore, this informal learning is particularly important, as leadership behaviors are shaped by repeated exposure to various role models rather than structured interventions.

Within management consultancies, leadership development and career progression have traditionally been integral components of exposure to multiple role models across varying hierarchical levels (Smets et al, 2012), encompassing a diverse array of leadership styles (Empson and Langley, 2017). Additionally, the dual interaction with both internal senior colleagues and external clients offers an expanded set of role models (Kornberger et al, 2011), as clients often exhibit distinct leadership styles that may contrast with those within one's own company (Empson et al, 2017). Thus, it is assumed that the leadership development process in management consultancies is fundamentally shaped by role modeling. As consultants progress in their careers, they refine their leadership identities through continuous observation, evaluation, and selective adoption of leadership behaviors exhibited by the role models around them (Ibarra, 1999). Given that role models serve as a critical reference point for leadership development, it is pertinent to investigate the characteristics of role models in this domain.

## 2.4 Research Gap and Question

The initial question posed in the role modeling process appears to be "With whom can I identify with?" (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). When confronted with a multitude of role models, each with a combination of positive and negative traits, individuals tend to formulate a composite role model to emulate, based on what they have observed (Gibson, 2003). In the extant literature, the process of role modeling has been thoroughly discussed as a part of organizational socialization, and workplace identity construction (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). To date, however, the subject of role modeling has received limited attention in the domain of leadership development. It has been asserted that people of outstanding achievements, access, and potential career trajectories serve as role models to other individuals (Gibson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Lockwood and Kunda, 1997), thus representing a critical component in an individual's performance enhancement (Gibson and Barron, 2003) and leadership development in organizational contexts (Vuhuong and Edwards, 2022). Notably, role models have been identified as being especially important for developing interpersonal skills (Javidan et al, 1995). According to Gibson (2003), role models are observed for broader aspects of social role rather than more limited tasks or skills. However, the precise nature of a role model in observational leadership development remains unclear, even if these findings indicate that role modeling is an optimal method for leadership development. The present study therefore aims to address this research gap by investigating the research question: *What characteristics and behaviors define role models in the field of observational leadership development?* In order to explore this question, the study places particular emphasis on management consultancies as their distinctive environment is conducive to observing leader role models. The goal is to develop a cross-organizational framework of characteristics that define role models in the field of observational leadership development.

## 3. Methodology

Considering the explorative aim of this study, a qualitative multiple case study design was conducted (Yin, 2018). To conduct the analysis, three distinct types of organizational career trajectories were selected as cases: (1) careers rooted in management consultancies, (2) careers situated within corporate firms, and (3) careers involving a crossover from consulting to corporate settings. The primary focus lies on management consultancies, as their unique setting creates an environment conducive to the observation of the salient attributes of leader role models. In addition, corporate firms and crossover trajectories were included to broaden the analytical scope of this study. Their inclusion allows for the identification of consistent role model characteristics across diverse contexts. The research process followed an inductive qualitative approach, thereby enabling the emergence of patterns and themes from the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted across all three career trajectories, using tailored interview guides for each case.

A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the three cases: 15 within management consultancies, ten within corporate firms, and ten within the crossover trajectory. Participants were recruited

from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It is noteworthy that all interviews were conducted in German, and relevant quotations have been translated into English for the sake of clarity and conciseness in reporting. The age of the participants ranged from 27 to 57 years (M = 35,7 years). Of the total sample, three participants identified as female, representing 20.0% of the total. In cases (1) and (2), which pertain to management consultancy and corporate firm, respectively, interviewees held managerial positions with professional experience spanning from one and a half to seven years. In case (3), relating to crossover trajectories, the interviewees occupied senior positions, such as vice president and C-level roles. Their professional backgrounds included management consultancy experience ranging from three to ten years and corporate experience ranging from one to twenty years.

The interviews were analyzed using the inductive thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## **4. Findings, Discussion, Implications, and Limitations**

### **4.1 Findings**

For each case, a particular definition of a leader role model was identified, which were then combined to formulate an overarching definition: “A leader role model embodies professional excellence, integrity, and transparent communication. Through authentic adherence to values, they provide orientation, cultivate trust, and facilitate the professional and personal development of others, while maintaining space for individual autonomy”.

The empirical analysis of the data resulted in a coherent, cross-organizational framework with six aggregated dimensions – *Leadership, Empowerment, Inter-Relation, Communication, Professional Competence, and Management* – which capture the essential characteristics that interviewees associated with leader role models. Each dimension is underpinned by distinct sub-themes, reflecting both the personal qualities and the concrete practices that inspire followers and shape their own leadership aspirations.

*Leadership* encompasses the qualities that make individuals credible, inspiring, and influential, combining integrity, strategic foresight, and adaptability to mobilize others toward shared goals.

*Empowerment* refers to the practices through which leaders enable others to reach their potential, take initiative, and perform optimally, while providing support, protection, and space for autonomy.

The dimension *Inter-Relation* highlights the social and relational competencies necessary for building trust, fostering collaboration, and maintaining respectful, participatory connections within teams.

*Communication* involves clear, sincere, and interactive exchange that promotes understanding, trust, and alignment, emphasizing transparency, active listening, and constructive dialogue.

*Professional Competence* represents the knowledge, skills, and expertise that establish credibility and authority, enabling leaders to guide others effectively through strategic insight and accumulated experience.

Finally, *Management* captures the operational and organizational capabilities required to translate vision into coordinated action, maintain structure, and ensure accountability in achieving objectives.

By revisiting the framework at this point, the study underscores its integrative nature: it is not the isolated presence of any single trait, but rather the interplay of these dimensions that defines exemplary role models in observational leadership development. This framework thus offers a comprehensive and empirically grounded response to the research question.

### **4.2 Discussion**

Through the analysis of interviews, this study developed a cross-organizational framework outlining the characteristics and behaviors of leader role models. This framework contributes to the existing literature on role models (Gibson, 2003) and leadership development (Day, 2000) by integrating previously separate strands of research and extending their scope beyond single organizational settings (Ibarra, 1999). It also contributes to the literature of professional service firms, especially the consulting sector, as it highlights how dynamic team structures, client interactions, and project work create unique opportunities for observational leadership development.

The identification of six aggregated dimensions with underlying sub-themes demonstrates that leader role models exert a substantial influence on the development of leadership skills individuals (Vuhuong and

Edwards, 2022). Importantly, the findings underscore that leadership development is fundamentally interpersonal (Day and Dragoni, 2015), highlighting the role of observational leadership learning as a key mechanism alongside action learning (Bilhuber Galli and Müller-Stewens, 2012) and experiential learning (Scholtz, 2024). This supports and extends Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), which emphasizes development through observation, showing how role models facilitate leadership growth in practical organizational contexts.

### 4.3 Implications

This research offers practical implications for leadership development strategies, especially within professional service firms. By identifying the traits perceived as most influential, organizations can more effectively shape onboarding, staffing, and coaching to support early career development. Theoretically, the study contributes to the leadership literature by proposing a taxonomy of role model traits specific to observational learning environments.

### 4.4 Limitations

The study's limitations include a relatively small and regionally focused sample, as well as reliance on retrospective accounts that may be subject to selective memory. As data collection is still ongoing, all findings should be considered provisional.

**Ethics declaration:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, with informed consent obtained from all participants. No ethical issues were encountered.

**AI declaration:** As non-native English speaker, AI-based tools (e.g., DeepL, Grammarly) were used to support spelling and grammar refinement. These tools were used solely to improve linguistic clarity and did not affect the manuscript's content.

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