

## **Leadership in the Digital Age: Between Technological Transformations and Fundamental Principles.**

**Daniele Battista**

University of Salerno

**Emilio Gaeta**

University of Salerno

### **Abstract**

This study explores the evolution of leadership in the context of the digital age, focusing on the impact of social media and new communicative dynamics. Analyzing the shift in the means through which leaders engage with the public, the paper highlights how digital tools have redefined the very nature of leadership, introducing greater transparency and accessibility. However, despite technological innovation, the constant presence of fundamental leadership principles such as integrity, empathy, and strategic vision emerges. This study contends that, while tools evolve, the core values of leadership tend to remain steadfast, adapting to new challenges and opportunities presented by digitization. In conclusion, the analysis suggests that leadership in the digital age takes shape as a dynamic balance between the effective use of new technologies and the preservation of intrinsic principles guiding leaders' behaviour.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Strategic Vision, Engagement, Effective Communication, Ethical Leadership

### **1. Introduction**

The engagement in organizing group work for activities aimed at launching a new product or managing a large multinational constitutes a crucial test for every individual, necessitating the need to assume a leadership position. In this context, leadership emerges as a fundamental competency, requiring a thoughtful and strategic approach in taking on responsibilities and directing group dynamics. Such an experience demands a refined balance between interpersonal skills, strategic vision, and resource management abilities. Beyond the specific context, this dimension implies a thorough analysis of the environment, effective communication, and the ability to inspire and motivate the team. In the articulation of the political context, the subject of this study, one inevitably finds oneself having to assume leadership positions. This commitment requires a profound understanding of the specific challenges in each situation. In the political arena, leadership translates into a sophisticated exploration of political and social dynamics, requiring the ability to guide the group toward common goals through strategies that promote cohesion and effectiveness in implementing public policies. Leadership becomes essential to manage limited resources, formulate strategic visions to address relevant complexities, and coordinate multidisciplinary efforts to ensure quality policies. Assuming leadership roles in political contexts, therefore, not only demands responsibility towards the citizenry but also contributes to individual growth, shaping indispensable leadership skills for the progress and well-being of society. The imperative of leadership emerges as a constant necessity within every organized activity, permeating every hierarchical level with an intrinsic presence (Mintzberg, 1975). The necessity of leadership arises from a deep understanding that goes beyond higher command positions, extending as a crucial element to all hierarchical levels of an organization. This relevance of leadership, even more pronounced in the political realm, has been further amplified with the introduction of social media (Salzano & Battista, 2022; Battista, 2023a). The pervasive use of these platforms has made leadership an even more central aspect, requiring advanced skills not only in top positions but at all levels of the organization and particularly in the contemporary political context. At all levels, assuming leadership responsibility becomes crucial for achieving set objectives, requiring the ability to lead, motivate, and coordinate collective efforts. This need cuts across various facets of organizational activities, influencing team dynamics, resource management, and the implementation of different strategies. Leadership, therefore, is not solely a distinctive trait of the top echelons but rather an indispensable attribute for organizational prosperity and synergy at all hierarchical levels. In this perspective, the concept of leadership presents itself as an essential component that permeates and defines the very nature of every organized activity. As suggested by Veriyanti and Nurhayati (2012), this process goes beyond mere resource management and implies a profound impact on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the members of the group or organization being led. The figure of the leader stands out for the ability to shape a clear and engaging vision, providing a strategic direction that motivates and mobilizes the involved human resources. In this context, leadership is not only bound to the exercise of formal authority but arises from the ability to communicate effectively, stimulate engagement, and maintain a rigorous ethic.

### **2. Conceptual Framework and Redefined Boundaries.**

The concept of leadership has been a theme that has traversed ancient epochs, involving Greek and Latin writers, authors of the Bible, and philosophers of ancient China.

However, it is in the 20th century that this topic assumed centrality, with the initiation of scientific and systematic research on leadership. This inquiry has generated a multitude of definitions of the concept, varying according to the authors who have addressed the subject, making the task of assigning a unique connotation to the term challenging. It is crucial to underline that, regardless of the context or the nature of the activity, leadership is intrinsically linked to the essential relationship between the leader and their collaborators. The earliest theories on leadership aimed to identify the characteristics and innate qualities possessed by great political, military, and social leaders throughout history. These theories, commonly identified as T. Carlyle's "Great Man" approach and synthesized through the so-called "trait approach," based their conceptual foundation on the assumption that effective leaders exhibit distinctive personal traits compared to those in subordinate roles. According to this perspective, the leader becomes an amalgamation of personal qualities that significantly differ from those in collaborative roles, delineating a dichotomy between those who assume leadership roles and those who do not. The analysis of leader characteristics in this context extends beyond the mere distinction of roles, incorporating elements such as originality, adaptability, introverted or extroverted orientation, dominance, self-assurance, integrity, optimism, and emotional control. From this viewpoint, leadership is conceived as a composition of distinctive attributes that empower the leader to lead effectively and influence others in the context of an organization or community. However, it is essential to note that this perspective has been subsequently enriched and contextualized by further theoretical developments in leadership research. In extension to this approach, the analysis of common characteristics among all leaders has been enriched not only by considering personality traits but also through careful examination of physical attributes, encompassing parameters such as height, weight, physical constitution, energy, appearance, and age. Similarly, attention has been dedicated to abilities, including social interaction skills, intelligence, eloquence, cooperative capabilities, and intuition. This broader perspective outlines a comprehensive framework of elements that distinguish a leader from other group members, highlighting how physical characteristics and cognitive skills are equally relevant as personality traits in defining the leadership profile. The understanding of these factors contributes to delineating a more complex and articulated view of leadership dynamics, emphasizing the multifactorial and complex nature of qualities that contribute to an individual's success in a leadership role. It should be noted that this perspective has also undergone subsequent evolutions in leadership research, expanding its field of analysis and considering a more holistic approach in evaluating leader characteristics. Currently, these aspects do not reside exclusively in a particular sphere but hold significant centrality, especially in the context of politics and leader communication. The complexity and diversity of attributes characterizing a leader, from personality traits to physical features and cognitive abilities, have acquired crucial importance in defining the image and effectiveness of a political leader. In this context, the visibility and perception of the leader are influenced not only by their ability to address complex political issues but also by the personal and physical characteristics projected in the public arena. The growing interconnection between the political and communicative spheres has led to an increasing emphasis on self-presentation by leaders, considering elements such as eloquence, physical appearance, and social interaction skills as strategic tools for building an effective narrative and gaining public support. This multidimensional perspective of leadership, therefore, not only has significant relevance in academic theory but is concretely reflected in the operational dynamics of contemporary politics and leader communication, highlighting the need for a comprehensive and integrated understanding of elements contributing to success in leadership.

Moreover, in this continuous self-promotion campaign, even the private dimension of the politician becomes a subject of storytelling. However, attention to intimate politics is not only linked to the interest of gossip magazines, entertainment shows, and talk shows but also to the politician's own will, choosing to erase the distances from the public and getting closer to what is defined as "pop politics" (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). However, it is essential to emphasize that the practice of political storytelling is an inherently complex activity that requires the formulation of a well-defined project, the presentation of engaging ideas, and the adoption of a narrative structure that at least evokes simulacra of authenticity and truth. The political sphere represents a unique context where concepts and ideals, such as values, identity, and pragmatism, interact in such a way as to lend themselves optimally to storytelling strategies and forms. In this context, deep relationships develop based on both the cognitive dimension of the message and the affective dimension of the narrative, both conveyed and experienced through the construction of stories that tend to solidify the leadership of the political figure (Battista, 2023c). This phenomenon can be assimilated to the great European monarchies, understood as powerful collective narratives (Moroni, 2017). Therefore, the need for authentic communication activities that follow the same logics of political communication emerges. While it may be considered a strategic appendix of relevance, this practice requires support from a clear political design. The contemporary conception imposes the idea that a politician must be charismatic, but it should be emphasized that this process is neither automatic nor simple (Giorgino, 2020).

Consequently, the ability to convey the message, values, and distinctive attributes that characterize the political profile is of paramount importance, facilitating identification and making the political figure perceived as close, every day, and accessible (Giansante, 2014). Current narrative thus configures as a system based on a robust emotional structure, where stories intertwine, becoming effective tools in promoting and consolidating political consensus and media construction in the groove of leadership.

### **3. The element to explore.**

It is evident that the distinguishing attribute among effective leaders is now universally recognized as emotional intelligence, representing a central and indispensable element in contemporary leadership dynamics. This perspective, which has gained relevance in the overall landscape, emphasizes the crucial importance of emotional skills in determining a leader's success. Emotional intelligence, understood as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage both one's own emotions and those of others, has become a key framework for assessing and understanding interpersonal and decision-making dynamics within leadership contexts. The emphasis on emotional intelligence reflects the growing awareness that relational and emotional skills are intrinsic to effective leadership, surpassing the traditional focus on cognitive or technical aspects. Therefore, emotional intelligence has become a central perspective in the analysis and training of leaders, highlighting the recognition of its crucial role in the theory and practice of contemporary leadership. This quality, as defined by Goleman (2011), is the competence to recognize and manage both one's own emotions and those of others. In this context, it is described as a set of five competencies that influence the relationship between leader effectiveness and performance. These competencies include self-awareness, which involves recognizing one's own moods, emotions, and impulses and their impact on others; self-regulation, the ability to manage and redirect destructive impulses and moods, along with a propensity to suspend judgment; motivation, understood as a passion for work beyond mere remuneration or social status, with a tendency to pursue goals with energy and persistence; empathy, the ability to understand the emotional makeup of others and to act considering their emotional reactions; and social skill, involving competence in managing relationships, creating networks, and the ability to find common ground. This perspective emphasizes that, although not everyone is inherently endowed with the same competencies, emotional intelligence can be learned throughout life. Everyone has the potential to enhance their emotional intelligence and the ability to lead people through periods of adversity, provided with continuous and genuine support through feedback from collaborators. However, it is important to note that, although this theory emphasizes the possibility of developing emotional intelligence, a definitive link between this competency and leader effectiveness has not yet been empirically proven (Goleman et al., 2004). Shifting to the contemporary context of political communication it emerges that the landscape is permeated by strategic engagement in the domain of political storytelling, aiming to capture attention and evoke fascination among voters in a landscape that increasingly resembles a "war of narratives" (Salmon, 2013). In this scenario, political storytelling assumes growing relevance as it becomes a fundamental tool for constructing and transmitting persuasive political messages. The use of stories, narrated through different media and platforms, aims to shape public opinion, influence voter perceptions, and consolidate consensus around certain political figures or ideologies. The effectiveness of political storytelling lies in its ability to emotionally engage the audience, create empathetic connections, and present the candidate's or party's vision and values in a captivating manner. This approach, becoming increasingly central in political communication strategies, reflects a growing awareness of the importance of narratives in shaping public opinion and defining the political context. Therefore, the critical analysis of political storytelling emerges as a fundamental area of study to understand the complex and dynamic dynamics that characterize contemporary political communication linked to leadership.

### **4. From Principles to New Frontiers: Navigating Between Essential Concepts and Emerging Challenges.**

For a leader, the use of communication is an unavoidable aspect, as every behavior inherently constitutes an act of communication, making it intrinsically impossible not to communicate. The relevance of communication is manifested in the result achieved through it, regardless of the initial intentions. In this perspective, the meaning of communication is not solely tied to explicit intentions but is shaped by the response that emerges from this interactive process. This concept emphasizes the idea that, in the context of leadership, every gesture, expression, and decision of the leader communicates something, and the perception of such signals by other members of the organization defines the actual meaning of communication. Therefore, awareness of the intrinsic and pervasive nature of communication constitutes a fundamental element for a leader aspiring to effective guidance. This unprecedented leadership via social media constitutes a paradigm that aims to integrate various perspectives on leadership, embracing trait-based, style-based, and contingency approaches. Reference can be made to the conceptual framework contributed by theorists such as M. Weber (1947) in sociology and J. M. Burns (1978) in political science. According to Burns (1978), transactional leadership is characterized by a reciprocal exchange between the leader and followers, in which the latter receive tangible benefits, such as salaries or prestige, in exchange for compliance with the leader's directives. This perspective distinguishes itself from the transformational approach as it highlights the contingent and instrumental nature of the leader-follower relationship, centered on the mutual provision and reception of valuable resources. In this context, new leadership aims to enrich the theoretical

debate, incorporating multidisciplinary contributions to provide a more comprehensive and articulated vision of the mechanisms underlying leadership dynamics. Weber's conception of leadership reflects a sophisticated and articulated sociological perspective, focused on the analysis of authority and power dynamics in organizations. Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology, outlined the concept of leadership within the broader context of his bureaucracy theory and charismatic authority.

For Weber, leadership represents a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the mere possession of formal or coercive power. He introduced the notion of "charismatic authority," where legitimacy and adherence to leadership derive from followers' perception of the leader's charisma. In this perspective, charisma is understood as an extraordinary and unique quality of the leader that attracts and inspires others, creating an enthusiastic and devoted follower. Leadership, according to Weber, can also take different forms, including traditional authority based on custom and historical legitimacy, as well as legal-rational authority based on formal rules and procedures. In summary, Weber's vision of leadership stands out for its attention to the symbolic and cultural dimension, where charisma and legitimacy play a central role in building an effective relationship between leader and followers within complex organizational contexts. However, the advent of social media has profoundly transformed the leadership landscape, creating a new dynamic characterized by the reduction of distances between leaders and the public. This transformation results in a substantial shift in traditional paradigms of leadership, as social media act as catalysts for more direct and immediate communication between leaders and the public. The interactive nature of these platforms allows leaders to express their ideas, visions, and initiatives in real-time, bypassing traditional intermediaries and reaching the public directly (Battista, 2023b). Simultaneously, it offers the public unprecedented access to leaders' perspectives, activities, and personalities, making leadership more transparent and accessible. The elimination of physical and communicative barriers contributes to creating a context where the public can actively participate in political discussions, providing instant feedback and directly influencing decision-making dynamics. This new form of leadership, mediated by social media, has the potential to shape a more open, interactive, and participatory political environment, redefining how power and authority are conceived and exercised in contemporary society. This transformation of leadership, mediated by social media, reflects a substantial change in the traditional paradigm of political communication and power dynamics. The elimination of physical and communicative distances creates a more leveled playing field, where leaders are constantly exposed to immediate feedback and public opinions. The real-time nature of this interaction redefines the very concept of representation, leading to greater accountability and transparency on the part of leaders. Moreover, the ability to connect directly with the public through social platforms offers leaders the opportunity to build and consolidate their image in a more personal manner, conveying authenticity and closeness. At the same time, this new dynamic requires leaders to navigate carefully between managing their online presence and the need to maintain a balance between a personal approach and public image. Ultimately, the impact of social media on leadership is significant, as it is reshaping power dynamics, enabling broader and more direct citizen participation in the decision-making process and shaping a new model of leadership that is more interactive and accountable.

## 5. Conclusion

The transformation of leadership in the era of social media has undoubtedly redefined the tools and channels through which leadership manifests, introducing new communicative and interactive dynamics. However, despite technological evolution, the fundamental principles of leadership seem to maintain substantial stability or, at the very least, evolve in harmony with the changing needs of society. Intrinsic values such as integrity, ethics, vision, and the ability to inspire others, while being expressed through digital platforms, remain central pillars of effective leadership. The ability to adapt to change, manage relationships, and lead with empathy remains fundamental guiding principles, regardless of the technological means used to exercise leadership. Therefore, while communication tools and methods evolve rapidly, the core principles of leadership seem to persist, dynamically adapting to new challenges and opportunities presented by the ever-growing digitization of society. In this context, leadership continues to be shaped by its intrinsic essence, anchored in human values and qualities that withstand technological transformations. In conclusion, the evolution of leadership in the context of social media has outlined a dynamic and transformative landscape, significantly influencing power dynamics and communication. The creation of a new leadership, characterized by the reduction of distances between leaders and citizens, has opened new opportunities and challenges in how power is conceived and exercised in contemporary society. The immediacy of communication through social platforms has made leadership more accessible and transparent, allowing leaders to interact directly with the public and citizens to actively participate in political discussions. However, this new dynamic also requires greater attention to managing public image and navigating between personal approach and leadership exercise. In this scenario, the very concept of representation has transformed, placing greater emphasis on authenticity and the responsibility of leaders. Ultimately, the interaction between leadership and social media has redefined how society conceives power and has contributed to shaping a more open, interactive, and participatory political environment.

**References:**

- Battista, D. (2023a). Knock, Knock! The Next Wave of Populism Has Arrived! An Analysis of Confirmations, Denials, and New Developments in a Phenomenon That Is Taking Center Stage. *Social Sciences*, 12(2), 100.
- Battista, D. (2023b). For better or for worse: politics marries pop culture (TikTok and the 2022 Italian elections). *Society Register*, 7(1), 117-142.
- Battista, D. (2023c). Winning against All Odds: Elly Schlein's Successful Election Campaign and Instagram Communication Strategies. *Social Sciences*, 12(6), 313.
- Battista, D., & Salzano, D. (2022). Political storytelling and the "Giorgia's Meloni case". *CENTRAL EUROPEAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW*, 23, 73-91.
- Carlyle, T. (1993). *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history* (Vol. 1). Univ of California Press.
- Goleman, D. (2011). *The brain and emotional intelligence: New insights* (Vol. 94). Northampton, MA: More than sound.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R.E., & McKee, A. (2004). *Essere leader: Guidare gli altri grazie all'intelligenza emotiva*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Giansante, G. (2014). *La comunicazione politica online: Come usare il web per costruire consenso e stimolare la partecipazione*. Roma: Carocci.
- Giorgino, F. (2020). *Alto volume: Politica, comunicazione e marketing*. Roma: Luiss University Press.
- Mazzoleni, G., & Sfardini, A. (2009). *Politica pop*. Il Mulino: Bologna
- Mintzberg, H. (1975). The manager's job: Folklore and fact. *Harvard business review*, 53(4).
- Moroni, C. (2017). *Le storie della politica: Perché lo storytelling politico può funzionare*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Salmon, C. (2013). *Storytelling: la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Veriyanti, U., & Nurhayati, M. (2022). The Role of Leader-Member Exchange in Moderating the Influence of Competence, Innovative Behavior, and Career Development on Employee Engagement. *European Journal of Business and Management Research*, 7(1), 153-159.
- Weber, M. (1968). *On charisma and institution building* (Vol. 322). University of Chicago Press.