

Embodied leadership in organizations: an integrative conceptual review

Organization
Management
Journal

365

Kenneth Michael Sweet

*Department of Management and Marketing, Sam Houston State University,
Huntsville, Texas, USA*

Celia Szelwach

*Department of Leadership and Organization Development and Change,
Cabrini University, Radnor, Pennsylvania, USA*

Kassim M. Tarhini

*Engineering Department, US Coast Guard Academy, New London,
Connecticut, USA, and*

Peter E. Vermeer

Institutional Research, US Coast Guard Academy, New London, Connecticut, USA

Received 16 April 2021
Revised 30 July 2021
16 August 2024
29 September 2025
Accepted 2 October 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This research advances recent scholarly conversations regarding the role of the physical body in organizational leadership by reviewing, synthesizing and clarifying extant literature on embodied leadership. In doing so, this study aims to advance embodied leadership approaches in the empirical study and practical application of organizational leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors apply an integrative review (Cronin & George, 2023) of embodiment in the organizational leadership literature to identify three communities of practice in which the concept has been explored, distill findings from each community to identify common themes and then synthesize those themes into an integrative conceptual framework.

Findings – This study shows that scholarship on embodied leadership is fragmented across three communities of practice: leadership development, leadership aesthetics and leadership emergence. By synthesizing these streams, the authors propose an integrated conceptual definition of embodied leadership as a group-level influence process involving bodily sensing, regulation and leaderlike enactment. Finally, the authors present an integrative conceptual model that clarifies how the body shapes leadership situations and enactments, offering a foundation for future empirical study.

Originality/value – Embodied leadership approaches are popular in the practices of coaching, organizational development and human resource development, while scientific understanding lags. The authors define embodied leadership and offer an exploratory conceptual model to enable future scholars to further explore the role of the physical body in leadership processes.

Keywords Leadership, Embodiment, Leaderful practice, Leadership-as-practice, Embodied leadership

Paper type Conceptual paper



© Kenneth Michael Sweet, Celia Szelwach, Kassim M. Tarhini and Peter E. Vermeer. Published in *Organization Management Journal*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <https://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/>

Organization Management Journal
Vol. 23 No. 3, 2026
pp. 365-379
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1541-6518
p-ISSN: 2753-8567
DOI 10.1108/OMJ-04-2021-1219

Organizations place exceptional importance on identifying and developing leadership in their ranks, which is evident in both the billions of dollars they spend annually on leadership programs and the preponderance of leadership study in both scholarly and practitioner journals. Despite these efforts, evidence suggests that organizations still struggle to identify, select and develop leadership talent (Geerts, 2024). A promising recent discussion in the organizational leadership literature concerns how the physical body influences the practice of leading, often referred to as embodied leadership. Although most scholars would likely recognize obvious examples of the physical body having a significant role in leadership processes, for example, the calming posture of Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats or the steely resolve of George W. Bush's speech on September 11, 2001, there is inconsistency in how the term embodied leadership is used and descriptions of how the body might influence leadership processes.

Scholars have offered embodied approaches to supplement existing leadership theory, which has largely ignored the role of the physical body in leading (Hamill, 2013). In simple terms, embodied leadership research is concerned with how the physical body affects and is affected by leadership processes. In this way, embodied leadership research offers a promising avenue to supplement extant theory which predominantly focuses on the cognitive and affective processes of leaders and followers. For example, transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) describes how leaders provide inspirational motivation to followers (as one element), though the role of the physical body as a tool in this process is mostly absent from that literature. Yet, one might find it difficult to imagine that the physical body does not play a role in inspirational motivation during the leadership practices of head football coaches or marine corps drill sergeants. Emergent concepts like mindful leadership or resonant leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) explore practices for developing leader awareness, attention and regulation of cognitive and affective states (Wibowo & Paramita, 2022), emphasizing the role of mental, psychological and emotional forces, while downplaying or ignoring the role of the physical body in these processes. Thus, while exploring the role of the body in leadership processes has emerged as a promising avenue for advancing leadership scholarship, an inconsistent and fragmented conceptualization of *embodied leadership* presents a challenge for the advancement of study.

An extensive search of the literature performed for this article yields interesting insights into the nomological network of embodied leadership as reflected in the literature to date. First, we find that embodied leadership has been explored by three communities of practice (as described by Cronin & George, 2023), with little overlap between these scholarly communities. The first has explored the bodily sensations of felt leadership experiences, focusing on how teaching regulatory techniques during leader development programs might improve leadership effectiveness (e.g. Szelwach, Sweet, Vermeer, & Tarhini, 2023). The second has focused on the aesthetics of enacted leadership, examining leadership as an experienced performance akin to theater, with an aim to understand and improve leadership effectiveness through the bodily mechanics of leaders (e.g. Woolsey et al., 2024). The third has described the role of the body as a tool for sensemaking within groups, such that:

- leadership is a collective phenomenon;
- group members sense and signal each other through their physical bodies to establish and maintain situationally relevant roles (including the role of leader); and
- member bodies are an important tool for understanding leader emergence and effectiveness in groups (e.g. Raelin, 2020).

In this integrative conceptual review, we provide an overview of the current state of embodied leadership research and an agenda for future research. In doing so, there are several contributions we believe we make. First, our review maps out extant literature describing the role of the body in leadership processes. In particular, we identify three predominant lenses through which the body has been explored in leadership. Second, we integrate these three views into a framework that more fully describes the bodily processes inherent in leadership. That is, as leadership occurs within and between individuals in a group, how is the body involved? Finally, we propose a future research agenda. Research on the role of the body in leadership might be divided into two broad categories. In one category, scholars should empirically test our integrative conceptual framework and refine the model describing how bodily processes affect organizational leadership. In the other, scholars should further examine how the body affects established leadership processes within robust existing literatures, such as transformational leadership, leader–member exchange (Erdogan & Bauer, 2014) or resonant leadership. Future work along these two paths will better inform a holistic picture of the role of the body in leadership processes.

A review of embodied leadership literature

In the mid-2000s, a new term started appearing in the scholarly study of leadership: *embodied leadership*. Scholars introduced embodied leadership to counter what they viewed as the extant leadership literature's overreliance on cognition and rationality, seeking to address that gap by describing how leaders experience, make sense of and influence situations through the physical body (Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Lord & Shondrick, 2011). When a new concept emerges in the scholarly literature, it is often examined through different lenses by various communities of practice which can result in fragmented and disjointed understanding (Cronin & George, 2023; Torraco, 2005). Integrative reviews are well-suited for synthesizing fragmented literatures that have grown within assorted communities of practice, (Cronin & George, 2023; Snyder, 2019), allowing for the development of an “initial or preliminary conceptualization of the topic, rather than a reconceptualization of previous models” (Torraco, 2005: p. 357). Here, we aim to provide an integrative *conceptual* review, such that we are synthesizing distinct communities of practice within an emerging literature at the concept level and not at the construct level (Cappelli, 2012). To complete our review, we followed Cronin and George (2023) four-step literature review process for conducting an integrative review.

Step one: articulate the topic locally

In this step, the goal is a complete set of studies from within one's own community of practice, which is achieved through standard keyword searches of discipline relevant databases (Cronin & George, 2023). We searched the title, abstract and keyword fields of journals indexed in *Academic Search Complete*, *Business Source Complete* and *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection* for the term *embodied leadership*. To avoid the potential for duplicitous inclusion, we removed dissertations and conference proceedings. We further removed unrelated studies, studies that were not available in full text and non-scholarly articles, yielding 28 results.

Step two: find other kinds of researchers studying the topic

In this step, Cronin and George (2023) advised reviewing concepts from within studies collected in Step 1 to identify other communities of practice studying the topic to compile a more complete list of studies. Key-word examination of the 28 studies from step one yielded the following concepts as associated with embodied leadership: acting, aesthetic, display,

embodiment, leaderful, performance, practice and theater. We then searched Google Scholar for the cooccurrence of *leadership* with any of the above terms, yielding 1,420 results. Removing unpublished, non-scholarly, redundant, unavailable and unrelated works, as well as dissertations and conference proceedings, reduced our pool of related articles to 34.

Step 3: bound identifiable communities of practice around a topic

In this step, boundaries are drawn to group the studies identified in Steps 1 and 2 to identify and name communities of practice and identify the differences between communities (Cronin & George, 2023). One method of achieving this is to look for networks of studies or author teams by examining citation patterns and identifying seminal works. In this study, we adopted a consensus methodology for qualitative content analysis of the articles (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Two scholars independently examined each of the articles to categorize (1) how the author explicitly defined embodied leadership, (2) how the study conceptualized (i.e. described and discussed) embodied leadership, (3) the methodology used in the article and (4) the discipline of the article or journal. Independent coders then met to discuss and reconcile coding disagreements. In these meetings, the first author served as a mediator and helped guide discussions toward agreement until consensus was reached on all categories for each article.

Three key findings emerged from Step 3 of the literature review process. First, we determined that scholars had conceptualized embodied leadership through at least three lenses, resulting in three distinct scholarly communities of practice. Second, we were unable to find a single peer-reviewed journal article that provided an explicit definition of embodied leadership. Third, empirical studies, when compared to theoretical papers, seem underrepresented in embodied leadership literature, when compared to leadership literature more broadly. For example, about 85% of papers published in *Leadership Quarterly* from 2010 to 2019 were empirical (Gardner et al., 2020), while just over 10% of papers identified here were empirical. Without explicit definitions of embodied leadership from any community of practice, we drew from seminal papers within each stream to develop brief conceptual descriptions of embodied leadership as used in each community of practice (see Table 1).

Step 4: distill primary findings from each community of practice

The final step is to use studies from each community of practice to determine what each community has said about the topic to distill what is common between communities and unique among the different communities (Cronin & George, 2023). For a mature topic, this might involve a deep exploration of common theoretical insights, demonstratable conclusions and boundary conditions. With a nascent topic, such as embodied leadership, this might involve identifying overlapping or diverging conceptual descriptions, clarifying the proposed utility of theory to practice within each community and extrapolating reasons for divergence or convergence. Below, we describe the three communities of practice, their espoused purposes for exploring the physical body in leadership processes and the resulting streams of research they have created in their pursuit of answering that purpose.

Leadership development stream

Scholars have described embodied leadership through the lens of bodily influence on processes internal to leaders, such as sensemaking (O'Malley, Ritchie, Lord, Gregory, & Young, 2009). Scholars in this stream are primarily from the communities of practice that examine coaching, organizational development, human resource development and management education. These scholars note that existing approaches to leader development

Table 1. Overview of the embodied leadership literature

Community	Conceptual view of EL	Relevant works	Approach	Scholarly area
Leader development	Leader development of self-awareness regarding own physiological states and associated internal processes leading to the self-regulation of physically displayed behavior	Bigo & Islam (2022) Blake (2009) Brendel & Bennett (2016) Briers (2015) Hamill (2011) Kenward (2018) Lord & Shondrick (2011) O'Malley et al. (2009) Parra Vargas et al. (2023) Rigg (2018) Rubenthiran et al. (2025) Schuyler (2010) Szelwach (2020) Szelwach et al. (2023) Bathurst & Cain (2013)	Empirical Practice Practice Practice Practice Conceptual Conceptual Empirical Conceptual Conceptual Practice Case study Case study	Management education Coaching Human resource development Training Leader development Leader development Organizational behavior Organizational behavior Management education Leader development Coaching Leader development Leader development
Leadership aesthetics	Leader use of posture, gesture and bodily movement to stimulate the senses and accompanying feelings, perceptions and thoughts of followers in a co-creative space	Ford et al. (2017) Hanold (2017) Hansen et al. (2007) Ladkin (2006) Ladkin (2008) Ladkin (2013) Ladkin & Taylor (2010a) Ladkin & Taylor (2010b) Reh et al. (2017) Ropo & Salovaara (2019) Woolsey et al. (2024) Collinson (2018) Fisher & Robbins (2015) Mensch & Barge (2019) Raelin (2005) Raelin (2011) Raelin (2016) Raelin (2020) Ropo Sauer, & Salovaara (2013)	Empirical Case study Conceptual Conceptual Case study Conceptual Conceptual Conceptual Review Conceptual Empirical Viewpoint Case study Conceptual Conceptual Conceptual Conceptual Conceptual Conceptual	Organizational behavior Organizational behavior Human resource development Organizational behavior Organizational behavior Organizational behavior Liberal arts Organizational behavior Liberal arts Organizational behavior Liberal arts Leadership development Organizational behavior Liberal arts Business ethics Organizational behavior Liberal arts Liberal arts Liberal arts Liberal arts
Leadership emergence	The recognition of contextual cues through bodily senses and the related use of bodily interactions to signal others in the co-creation of collective efforts toward a desired outcome			

Source(s): Authors' own work

overemphasize cognition, specifically skill and competency development and position embodied leadership as an alternative to disembodied views of leadership development ([Briers, 2015](#)). They draw on Somatics, mindfulness and embodied cognition research to encourage the development of leadership skills in bodily awareness and self-regulation ([Hamill, 2013](#)). In this stream, embodied leadership is a way of being where heightened bodily awareness and regulation of physiological responses enable the achievement of results ([Karssiens, Van der Linden, Wilderom, & Furtmueller, 2014](#); [Szelwach, 2020](#)).

Leadership aesthetics stream

Others have described embodied leadership through the lens of aesthetics, exploring how bodily displays affect the relational experience of leadership ([Bathurst, 2007](#)). Scholars in this stream are primarily from the communities of practice that examine organizational behavior and organizational psychology. Their work focuses on the role of the body in follower perceptions of leader attributes (e.g. charisma, [Ladkin, 2006](#)) and, consequently, how relational variables such as trust, power and control manifest between parties ([Ladkin, 2008](#); [Ladkin & Taylor, 2010a](#)) based on the physical display of leaderlike behavior by a focal leader. Here, embodied leadership is a visceral demonstration ([Ladkin, 2008](#)), whereby the body serves as a vehicle through which leaders align their actions with the needs of the situation to engage others ([Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007](#)). In this stream, embodied

leadership involves the bodily display of behaviors to meet situational leadership expectations (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010a).

Leadership emergence stream

Scholars have also described the body as a sensor and signal in the process of leadership. Scholars in this stream are primarily from communities of practice that explore the liberal arts and social sciences. Here, the body interacts with the environment to sense opportunities and threats, and functions as a signal to attune others to the situation (Raelin, 2005). Through dynamic processes of sensing and signaling, group members achieve collective awareness and sensemaking (Raelin, 2020). This sensing-signaling process serves a central role in the co-creation of leadership within groups, as members mobilize toward shared purpose and effort (Fisher & Robbins, 2015). Leadership emerges organically, based on bodily interactions, as the group senses and responds to the situation (Pearce & Sims, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In this stream, embodied leadership is a dynamic role-making process that enables collective sensemaking so that a group can align efforts toward goal achievement (Collinson, 2018).

To summarize, scholars have introduced *embodied leadership* to examine the role of the body in leadership processes through at least three lenses: (1) leader bodily processes, such as self-awareness and self-regulation, (2) leadership aesthetics and the bodily performance of leadership and (3) bodily interactions in the co-creation of leadership within groups. Each stream has adopted embodied leadership as a central concept, though none has explicitly defined it and the three streams have yet to be integrated.

Thematic synthesis of embodied leadership in organizations

Now that we have identified and described three conceptualizations of embodied leadership in organizations, we need to synthesize the findings of the three streams in a way that enables future scholars to more effectively explore why and how embodied leadership occurs in organizations. One common approach for synthesis, particularly in emergent and conceptual topics, is to develop a model (Torraco, 2005). In doing so, the development of constructs, as well as the exploration of relationships and boundary conditions, becomes possible. Cronin and George (2023) offer a four-step approach to completing this synthesis: (1) abstract the findings of each community into common themes, (2) explore how the themes relate, (3) integrate themes and (4) refine and refocus. We follow this process below such that Steps 1 and 2 are in the next section and Steps 3 and 4 are in the section that follows.

Common themes from three communities of practice

We adopted concept mapping (Trochim & McLinden, 2017), a tool frequently used in project management and decision science disciplines, to derive common themes from the studies in our literature review. We used a popular online affinity mapping program that allowed the authorship team to identify, share, group and aggregate concepts identified in the studies. In doing so, we were able to identify numerous common themes within and between communities of practice and to aggregate those into broader themes as recommended by Cronin and George (2023). The result is three broad themes that articulate overlap and agreement in the conceptualization of embodied leadership in organizations.

First, embodied leadership requires the intentional physical display of leaderlike behavior. The bodily senses of group members are essential to role-making processes, sensemaking and the felt experience of leadership (Bathurst & Cain, 2013; Hansen et al., 2007). Bodily actions allow others to perceive a leader's personal attributes, such as

confidence, integrity, charisma or authenticity (Ladkin, 2006; Reh, Van Quaquebeke, & Giessner, 2017). Scholars have referred to embodied leadership as a “leadership performance” (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010a, p. 67) and discussed the beauty inherent in the “act of leadership” (Taylor, 2014, p. 240). Leaders must be aware of that role and purposely match their bodily displays to the expectations of those they wish to arouse toward change (Ladkin, 2008).

Second, leaderful behavior requires internal alignment, which leaders achieve through the recognition and regulation of their internal states in response to bodily stimuli (Brendel & Bennett, 2016). Leadership situations engender anxiety, confidence, fear, pride, stress and other psychological and physiological forces that are recognized through bodily sensation (i.e. sensing the world around them; e.g. being yelled at by someone), manifest in bodily responses (i.e. feeling a physical response; e.g. sweating or elevated heart rate) and need to be regulated to enable leaderlike behavior (Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Hamill, 2013). A leader’s personal characteristics, such as resilience, values, attitudes, beliefs and motivations, may derail attempts at recognizing and responding to leadership situations in effective ways (Van Knippenberg, 2011). Hence, leaders must be adept at recognizing how they perceive the world around them to be able to regulate their responses to that world. These “ways of knowing” (Szelwach, 2020, p. 55) are gained through physical interaction with the world and are carried by individuals in their bodies, affecting their decision-making and behavior.

Third, embodied leadership is not confined to a role or an individual but emerges as a process whereby the leaderlike behavior of a group member allows the group to collectively sense and recognize environmental cues and mobilize efforts toward achieving change (Collinson, 2018; Raelin, 2016). Leadership is aimed at purposeful change and the leader recognizes that purpose and their role in bringing about the change (Fisher & Robbins, 2015). The body serves as a conduit (i.e. sensor and signal) for identifying and communicating a threat or opportunity (i.e. a potential change), while bodily interactions between group members help to identify who among them is suited to lead in that situation (Raelin, 2020). Leadership, therefore, is a dynamic group process whereby shared sensemaking between members about who is leading, what leadership means in that situation (e.g. focus the attention of the group, excite the group to action or calm the fears of the group) and what the group should do next is created through the sensing and signaling of members’ physical bodies.

These three themes common between communities of practice coalesce to suggest that embodied leadership is a process whereby an individual recognizes a need for change through sensing and perceiving the environment, regulates their bodily responses to environmental stimuli through self-awareness and self-regulation and displays appropriate (i.e. leaderlike) behavior to engage others in purposeful change efforts.

Integration of common themes

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that includes dynamic processes and contingencies between leaders, followers and context, which often requires scholars to parse out and describe specific aspects (Schrujjer & Vansina, 2002). We view organizational leadership as a process of social influence that mobilizes others toward goal-directed change, such that leadership arises in response to environmental cues that signal the need for change (Tannenbaum, Weschler, & Massarik, 1961). In keeping with this view, we introduce an integrated conceptual definition of embodied leadership as *a group-level influence process whereby the focal member of a workgroup senses an opportunity or threat, appropriately*

regulates their internal state, and effectively displays behavior that mobilizes others toward purposeful change.

To advance the study of this concept, we provide an integrative conceptual model in Figure 1. The proposed model is divided into two stages, the leadership situation and leadership enactment, which describe the embodied process of leading a workgroup from environmental cues to purposeful change. The leadership situation concerns how the body enables sensing/perceiving environmental cues and recognition/regulation of internal physiological and psychological processes in response to those cues. Leadership enactment concerns how the body serves as an instrument for displaying leaderlike behavior which mobilizes collective efforts toward purposeful change. The model is based on two assumptions. First, leadership is not a singular process. A group might be undergoing several concurrent leadership situations at one time. Second, leadership is not omnipresent, but rather a response to environmental demands. Leadership is not always occurring, and leaders are not always leading. Together, these assumptions mean that at any given time a group may be responding to a variety of demands, and leadership might be enacted by one or several members.

The leadership situation

The leadership situation includes the bodily processes whereby a group member (i.e. the focal member) senses an opportunity for leadership in response to an environmental cue. Workgroups face innumerable changes in the external and internal environment. Each change represents some degree of uncertainty and risk due to the creation of potential misalignment between the group and its relevant environment (Sweet, 2020). Changes to the internal environment, such as adding a new member or adopting new technology, threaten established norms, values and shared meaning (Schaubroeck, Chunyan, & Hannah, 2013). Changes in the external environment, such as organizational restructuring or shifting stakeholder demands, threaten established stakeholder relationships, resource flows and tacit knowledge structures (Ostroff & Schulte, 2007). A change in the environment is typically accompanied by cues, which may be more or less obvious to specific workgroup members based on their characteristics, professional development and contextual constraints (Raelin, 2005). An environmental cue must be sensed (i.e. bodily) and then perceived (i.e. cognitively). While the body can sense the need for change, the mind must make meaning of those senses through perception. For a leadership situation to occur, the focal member of the workgroup must physically sense a change in the environment and must form perceptions

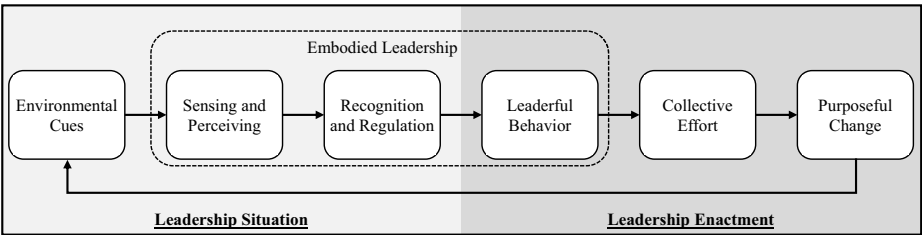


Figure 1. An exploratory conceptual model of the embodied leadership process
Source: Authors' own work

about the meaning of that bodily experience (Ancona, 2012; O'Malley et al., 2009; Springborg, 2010).

Engaging in leaderful behavior requires maintaining internal alignment through recognition of thoughts and feelings and regulation of bodily responses, as required, to display situationally appropriate leadership (Brendel & Bennett, 2016). Sensing an environmental cue and perceiving the need for leadership arouses wide-ranging cognitive, affective and bodily stimuli that can overwhelm an individual with excitement, anticipation, anxiety, stress and other responses that might enable or derail leaderful behavior (Hamill, 2011). Recognition of the leadership situation occurs through self-reflection, whereby the focal member assesses whether they possess the expertise, power, authority and other characteristics needed to lead the group. Individuals who perceive themselves as lacking ability, motivation or opportunity to lead the group, relative to the perceived environmental demand, are unlikely to recognize themselves as capable of enacting leadership.

A focal member who recognizes themselves as capable of leading the group will form role expectations based on their characteristics and the leadership situation (Ensari, Riggio, Christian, & Carlsaw, 2011). Recognizing self in the role of leader exacerbates the cognitive, affective and physiological reactions to the environmental cue (Guedes, Gonçalves, Gonçalves, & Patel, 2018). Effective leaders learn to recognize these physiological reactions by improving self-awareness through Somatics, mindfulness, meditation, reflection and metacognition (Briers, 2015; Hamill, 2011). Recognition of internal states and processes is, therefore, essential to regulation. Individuals who effectively recognize and regulate physiological responses have demonstrated better leadership decision-making and increased leadership effectiveness (Kaluza, Boer, Buengeler, & van Dick, 2020; Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013). The leadership situation begins with awareness of an environmental cue and ends when the focal member recognizes themselves in a leadership role and regulates their physiological responses to internal and external stimuli in preparation for leadership enactment.

Leadership enactment

The leadership situation describes how the environment affects the bodily processes of the focal member, while leadership enactment describes how the bodily processes of the focal member affect the environment. Leaders and followers interact through their bodily presence and movement through situations, such that their identities are interwoven, and one cannot exist without the other (Ladkin, 2013). Leaderful behavior eases fear and anxiety by clarifying the situation for group members, which reduces group paralysis from fear in an uncertain environment (Ancona, 2012; Raelin, 2005; Springborg, 2010). The body serves as an instrument through which the focal member acts out the role of leader and indicates to others that they are leading in that situation (Raelin, 2020). Leaderful behavior that is consistent with leadership role expectations reduces fear and anxiety and enables collective purpose and action (Hanold, 2017; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010a; Reh et al., 2017).

The enactment of leadership is embodied as a social process of mutual influence between leaders and followers such that it engenders a felt, visceral response from those engaged with it (Ladkin, 2013). Leaders monitor (through the body) the bodily responses of others to intentionally adjust their display of leaderful behavior to meet the changing needs of followers (Karssiens et al., 2014; Szelwach, 2020). Followers feel (through the body) the leader's behavior and respond by aligning their actions to expectations. Through the felt leadership experience, leaderful behavior increases feelings of trust between the leader and the group, which aligns and engages others in meaningful efforts to meet group needs (Ladkin, Ladkin, 2013; Raelin, 2011). When the workgroup perceives leader behavior as

authentic, appropriate and effective they align their efforts with the focal member toward purposeful change (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010a).

Workgroups change and are changed by their environments (McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000). Embodied leadership manifests in the effect the workgroup has on its environment as a result of purposeful change. Leadership is aimed at maintaining or regaining internal and external alignment so that groups can continue to survive and thrive (Sweet, 2020). Embodied leadership enables collective effort toward purposeful change that realigns the group in response to a threat or opportunity such that leadership is a dynamic and iterative process of maintaining environmental alignment through change.

Discussion

This paper expands recent theoretical exploration of how the physical body influences organizational leadership by integrating three research streams on embodied leadership, drawing from embodied perspectives of leadership development, leadership aesthetics and leadership emergence. Available studies illustrate abundant scholarly interest in embodied leadership, as well as scarce empirical research. The lack of empirical research may be due to the lack of an extant conceptual definition or a clear conceptual model. The following section discusses limitations and future directions, followed by implications for practice.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of our review is the lack of empirical research on embodied leadership in organizations. As shown in Table 1, research on embodied leadership has been heavily conceptual, with a handful of practice papers and case studies. While the lack of empirical studies reduces our ability to draw inferences about the relationship of embodied leadership to other concepts or constructs, the fragmented and mostly conceptual nature of the reviewed literature suggests that interest outpaces understanding and that an integrative review is necessary. Many scholars have criticized the methodological rigor of leadership studies (e.g. Alimo-Metcalfe, 2013), and the very issues embodied leadership scholars have sought to address are likely the reason that empirical research in this area has been exceptionally challenging. Studying the physiological (i.e. bodily) processes of leaders is difficult, time-consuming and expensive while conducting survey-based research on perceptions is significantly quicker and more cost-effective. We recommend future embodied leadership research use qualitative methods such as content analysis and video ethnography.

Content analysis (Morris, 1994) of journals, emails or meeting minutes (for example) might allow examination of relationships between embodied leadership and antecedents or outcomes, as well as leadership emergence within workgroups. Content analysis could be coupled with video ethnography (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012) for observing embodied leadership in real-time workgroup interactions, which could also be correlated with objective measures of workgroup attributes and performance indicators. Finally, artificial intelligence may improve the efficiency of analyzing large data sets from the qualitative study of embodied leadership, allowing statistical inferences like those made in quantitative research (Longo, 2020). As each act, word and gesture of a research subject is an essential data point for qualitative researchers observing embodied leadership practices, machine perception provides methods to recognize and classify human behaviors in more efficient and effective ways (Longo, 2020).

A second limitation of our review is the lack of disambiguation from other leadership theories. Most embodied leadership research has emerged to address specific gaps in the broader study of leadership, though research integrating embodied leadership approaches with more widely accepted leadership theory is scarce. While a comprehensive review of the

leadership domain is beyond the scope of this paper, leadership theories typically focus narrowly on one of the following: attributes of leaders, decision-making processes, social influence processes, interactional and relational processes, contextual effects or boundary conditions or the emergence of collective purpose in social groups. Although this paper briefly touches on each of these issues, integrating embodiment research into more established theories of leadership may better elucidate the role of the physical body in leadership processes.

Similar concepts, those that are defined as having a sensory, cognitive and behavioral element, such as emotional intelligence, ethical leadership and sociopolitical skill, may be excellent guideposts for integrating embodied leadership into the broader leadership literature. It is recommended that future researchers adopt qualitative methods to better understand the concept and explore embodiment through other leadership lenses to gain a better understanding of embodied leadership.

Implications for practice

For practitioners of leadership development, coaching and human resources development, caution should be taken in adopting embodied approaches without further research. The scarcity of empirical studies, coupled with the proliferation of articles promoting embodied practices (particularly in leadership development programs), should alarm scholars and practitioners alike. Management fads are often adopted before they can demonstrate a proven track record of success (Gibson & Tesone, 2001), and this is likely truer for the lucrative fields of leadership and leader development. In practice, many contemporary models of leadership potentially create harm relative to benefit due to an overemphasis on leadership in the performance of managerial roles, which results in change for the sake of change (By, 2020). Making everyone in the organization a potential leader, each scouring the environment for opportunities to demonstrate leaderlike behavior, may have unintended consequences.

Importantly, due to the corporeal nature of embodied leadership, it may be best studied by observing workgroups in natural settings. In this way, practitioners with an interest in embodied leadership might consider aligning their efforts with scholars to examine the effects and implications of embodiment training and embodied leadership practice.

References

- Alimo-Metcalfe, B. (2013). A critical review of leadership theory. H.S. Leonard, R. Lewis, A. M. Freedman, J. Passmore, (Eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of the psychology of leadership, change, and organizational development*, Wiley Blackwell, 15-47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118326404.ch2>.
- Ancona, D. (2012). Sensemaking: Framing and acting in the unknown. in S. Snook, N. Nohria, R. Khurana (Eds), *The handbook for teaching leadership*, Sage, 3-19.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership*, 2nd ed., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095>.
- Bathurst, R. (2007). Aesthetic leadership: Managing fields of flow in art and business. *Organization Management Journal*, 4(2), 170-174, <https://doi.org/10.1057/omj.2007.18>.
- Bathurst, R., & Cain, T. (2013). Embodied leadership: The aesthetics of gesture. *Leadership*, 9(3), 358-377, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013485851>.
- Bigo, V., & Islam, G. (2022). Embodiment and management learning: Understanding the role of bodily analogy in a yoga-based learning model. *Academy of Management Learning &*

- Education*, 21(4), 648-668, <https://doi.org/ezproxy.stedwards.edu/10.5465/amle.2021.0190>.
- Blake, A. (2009). *Developing somatic intelligence: Leadership and the neurobiology of embodied learning*, Amanda Blake.
- Brendel, W., & Bennett, C. (2016). Learning to embody leadership through mindfulness and Somatics practice. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 18(3), 409-425, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422316646068>.
- Briers, F. (2015). Embodied leadership. *Training Journal*, 2016(January), 5-7.
- By, R. T. (2020). Organizational change and leadership: out of the quagmire. *Journal of Change Management*, 20(1), 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2020.1716459>.
- Cappelli, P. (2012). A cautionary view of construct validity. *Human Resource Management Review*, 22(2), 149-151, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2011.11.009>.
- Collinson, M. (2018). What's new about leadership-as-practice? *Leadership*, 14(3), 363-370, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715017726879>.
- Cronin, M. A., & George, E. (2023). The why and how of the integrative review. *Organizational Research Methods*, 26(1), 168-192, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428120935507>.
- Ensari, N., Riggio, R. E., Christian, J., & Carlsaw, G. (2011). Who emerges as a leader? meta-analyses of individual differences as predictors of leader emergence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(4), 532-536, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.05.017>.
- Erdogan, B., & Bauer, T. N. (2014). Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory: The relational approach to leadership. in D. V. Day (Ed.), *The oxford handbook of leadership and organizations*, Oxford University Press, 407-433.
- Fisher, K., & Robbins, C. R. (2015). Embodied leadership: Moving from leader competencies to leaderful practices. *Leadership*, 11(3), 281-299, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715014522680>.
- Ford, J., Harding, N. H., Gilmore, S., & Richardson, S. (2017). Becoming the leader: Leadership as material presence. *Organization Studies*, 38(11), 1553-1571, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616677633>.
- Geerts, J. M. (2024). Maximizing the impact and ROI of leadership development: A theory- and evidence-informed framework. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(10), 1-47, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14100955>.
- Gibson, J. W., & Tesone, D. V. (2001). Management fads: Emergence, evolution, and implications for managers. *Academy of Management Executive*, 15(4), 122-133, <https://doi.org/10.5465/AME.2001.5898744>.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*, Harvard Business School Press.
- Guedes, M. J., Gonçalves, H. M., Gonçalves, V. D C., & Patel, P. C. (2018). Lower on the totem pole: The influence of sense of control and trait anxiety on cortisol at lower hierarchical levels. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 25(S1), 94-107, <https://doi.org/10.1037/str0000075>.
- Hamill, P. (2011). Embodied leadership: towards a new way of developing leaders. *Strategic HR Review*, 10(5), 5-10, <https://doi.org/10.1108/14754391111154832>.
- Hamill, P. (2013). *Embodied leadership: the somatic approach to developing your leadership*, Kogan Page Limited.
- Hanold, M. (2017). Toward a new approach to authentic leadership: The practice of embodied dialogical “thinking” and the promise of shared power. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 19(4), 454-466, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422317728940>.
- Hansen, H., Ropo, A., & Sauer, E. (2007). Aesthetic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(6), 544-560, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.09.003>.

- Kaluza, A. J., Boer, D., Buengeler, C., & van Dick, R. (2020). Leadership behaviour and leader self-reported well-being: A review, integration and meta-analytic examination. *Work & Stress*, 34(1), 34-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2019.1617369>.
- Karssiens, A. E. A., Van der Linden, C., Wilderom, C. P. M., & Furtmueller, E. (2014). Embodied mind knowledge in leadership practice: Creating space in patterned thoughts and behaviors. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(3), 231-241, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1056492613513501>.
- Kenward, T. (2018). Embodied practices for OD work and life. *OD Practitioner*, 50(1), 37-43.
- Knoblauch, H., & Schnettler, B. (2012). Videography: Analysing video data as a 'focused' ethnographic and hermeneutical exercise. *Qualitative Research*, 12(3), 334-356, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111436147>.
- Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2023). Structuring qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative content analysis: Methods, practice and software*, 2nd ed., Sage, Chapter 5, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036212940.n5>.
- Ladkin, D. (2006). The enchantment of the charismatic leader: Charisma reconsidered as aesthetic encounter. *Leadership*, 2(2), 165-179, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715006062933>.
- Ladkin, D. (2008). Leading beautifully: How mastery, congruence and purpose create the aesthetic of embodied leadership practice. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(1), 31-41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2007.12.003>.
- Ladkin, D. (2013). From perception to flesh: A phenomenological account of the felt experience of leadership. *Leadership*, 9(3), 320-334, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013485854>.
- Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. S. (2010b). Leadership as art: Variations on a theme. *Leadership*, 6(3), 235-241, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715010368765>.
- Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. S. (2010a). Enacting the 'true self': towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(1), 64-74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.10.005>.
- Longo, L. (2020). Empowering qualitative research methods in education with artificial intelligence. in A. Costa, L. Reis, A. Moreira, (Eds), *Computer supported qualitative research*, Springer, 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31787-4_1.
- Lord, R. G., & Shondrick, S. J. (2011). Leadership and knowledge: Symbolic, connectionist, and embodied perspectives. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(1), 207-222, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.12.016>.
- McGrath, J. E., Arrow, H., & Berdahl, J. L. (2000). The study of groups: Past, present, and future. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(1), 95-105, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0401_8.
- Martinko, M. J., Harvey, P., Brees, J. R., & Mackey, J. (2013). A review of abusive supervision research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(S1), S120-S137, <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1888>.
- Mensch, K., & Barge, J. (2019). Understanding challenges to leadership-as-practice by way of MacIntyre's three rival versions of moral enquiry. *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 38(1), 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.5840/bpej2018101273>.
- Morris, R. (1994). Computerized content analysis in management research: A demonstration of advantages & limitations. *Journal of Management*, 20(4), 903-931, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-2063\(94\)90035-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-2063(94)90035-3).
- O'Malley, A. L., Ritchie, S. A., Lord, R. G., Gregory, J. B., & Young, C. M. (2009). Incorporating embodied cognition into sensemaking theory: A theoretical examination of embodied processes in a leadership context. *Current Topics in Management*, 14, 151-181.
- Ostroff, C., & Schulte, M. (2007). Multiple perspectives of fit in organizations across levels of analysis. in C. Ostroff, T. A. Judge, (Eds), *Perspectives on organizational fit*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 3-69.

- Parra Vargas, E., Philip, J., Carrasco-Ribelles, L. A., Alice Chicchi Giglioli, I., Valenza, G., Marín-Morales, J., & Alcañiz Raya, M. (2023). The neurophysiological basis of leadership: A machine learning approach. *Management Decision*, 61(6), 1465-1484, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-02-2022-0208>.
- Pearce, C. L., & Sims, H. P. (2000). Shared leadership: toward a multi-level theory of leadership. *Advances in interdisciplinary studies of work teams*, 7, 115-139, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1572-0977\(00\)07008-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1572-0977(00)07008-4).
- Raelin, J. (2011). From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7(2), 195-211, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715010394808>.
- Raelin, J. A. (2005). We the leaders: In order to form a leaderful organization. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 12(2), 18-30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190501200202>.
- Raelin, J. A. (2016). It's not about the leaders: It's about the practice of leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 45(2), 124-131, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.02.006>.
- Raelin, J. A. (2020). Toward a methodology for studying leadership-as-practice. *Leadership*, 16(4), 480-508, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715019882831>.
- Reh, S., Van Quaquebeke, N., & Giessner, S. R. (2017). The aura of charisma: A review on the embodiment perspective as signaling. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(4), 486-507, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.01.001>.
- Rigg, C. (2018). Somatic learning: Bringing the body into critical reflection. *Management Learning*, 49(2), 150-167, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507617729973>.
- Ropo, A., & Salovaara, P. (2019). Spacing leadership as an embodied and performative process. *Leadership*, 15(4), 461-479, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018768707>.
- Ropo, A., Sauer, E., & Salovaara, P. (2013). Embodiment of leadership through material place. *Leadership*, 9(3), 378-395, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013485858>.
- Rubenthiran, S., S Senathirajah Abdul, R. B., Linkesvaran, S., Sayeeduzzafar, Q., & Rasheedul, H. (2025). Equine-assisted experiential learning: A literature review of embodied leadership development in organizational behavior. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(8), 298, <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15080298>.
- Schaubroeck, J. M., Chunyan, P. A., & Hannah, S. T. (2013). Developing trust with peers and leaders: Impacts on organizational identification and performance during entry. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(4), 1148-1168, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0358>.
- Schrijver, S. G. L., & Vansina, L. S. (2002). Leader, leadership and leading: From individual characteristics to relating in context. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23(7), 869-874, <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.171>.
- Schuyler, K. G. (2010). Increasing leadership integrity through mind training and embodied learning. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(1), 21-38, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018081>.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 23-28, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003023>.
- Springborg, C. (2010). Leadership as art – leaders coming to their senses. *Leadership*, 6(3), 243-258, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715010368766>.
- Sweet, K. M. (2020). A fit model of organizational leadership. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 20(1), 104-119, <https://doi.org/10.33423/jop.v20i1.2763>.
- Szelwach, C. (2020). Embodied leadership: Skills for the fourth industrial revolution. *Body Studies Journal*, 2(6), 53-65.

- Szelwach, C., Sweet, K. M., Vermeer, P. E., & Tarhini, K. M. (2023). A holistic approach to embodied leadership development at the U.S. Coast guard academy. *Organization Development Journal*, 41(1), 54-68.
- Tannenbaum, R. J., Weschler, I. R., & Massarik, F. (1961). *Leadership and organization: a behavioral science approach*, McGraw-Hill.
- Taylor, S. S. (2014). Open your heart. in Ladkin, D. and Taylor, S. (Eds), *The physicality of leadership: Gesture, entanglement, taboo, possibilities*, Emerald Group, 239-252.
- Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356-367, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283>.
- Trochim, W. M., & McLinden, D. (2017). Introduction to a special issue on concept mapping. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 60, 166-175, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.10.006>.
- Van Knippenberg, D. (2011). Embodying who we are: Leader group prototypicality and leadership effectiveness. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1078-1091, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.09.004>.
- Wibowo, A., & Paramita, W. (2022). Resilience and turnover intention: The role of mindful leadership, empathetic leadership, and self-regulation. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 29(3), 325-341, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518211068735>.
- Woolsey, L., Carroll, B., & O'Connor, C. P. (2024). Leadership development and the politics of intentionality: A case study of organisational theatre. *Management Learning*, 56(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076241238390>.

Corresponding author

Kenneth Michael Sweet can be contacted at: sweet@shsu.edu