

SESSION: BOARD OF DIRECTORS' PRACTICES
**LEADERSHIP APPROACHES OF
CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS LEADERS:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEN
FORBES CEOS IN LIGHT OF
CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP
THEORIES**

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How to cite: Xanthopoulou, P. I., Vyttas, V., & Papakonstantinou, S. (2026). Leadership approaches of contemporary business leaders: A comparative analysis of ten Forbes CEOs in light of contemporary leadership theories. In A. Celentano, A. Kostyuk, S. Dell'Atti, & G. Giovando (Eds.), *Corporate governance: Multidisciplinary research* (pp. 9–12). Virtus Interpress. <https://doi.org/10.22495/cgmrp1>

Received: 28.09.2025
Accepted: 27.10.2025
Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Human-Centered Management, Psychological Safety, Comparative Analysis, Forbes CEOs

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JEL Classification: M14, M52, M54, D23
DOI: 10.22495/cgmrp1

Abstract

Leadership is one of the most complex and widely discussed phenomena in the field of business administration and organizational sciences (Bass, 2008). Chief executive officers (CEOs) play a pivotal role in strategy formulation, culture shaping, and organizational identity creation, acting not only as resource managers but also as architects of their companies' vision and mission (Xanthopoulou, 2021; Robbins & Judge, 2019). This study, based on secondary data analysis, explored the leadership approaches of ten top CEOs, as reflected in their interviews with Forbes magazine. The research incorporated guided qualitative content analysis,

with the aim of highlighting patterns, convergences, and divergences in the leadership strategies and philosophies applied by the most recognizable leaders in the contemporary business scene (Bowen, 2009). The theoretical background is drawn from five basic leadership theories: transformational, servant, situational, authentic, and strategic (Rowe & Guerrero, 2018). The research attempted to answer five research questions concerning leadership philosophy, human resource management practices, crisis management strategies, the promotion of innovation, and the integration of fundamental values into organizational culture.

At the theoretical level, the analysis of leadership is based on the transition from early theories that treated leadership as an innate characteristic to contemporary approaches that emphasize its procedural, relational, and adaptive dimensions. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiration and the creation of a shared vision, highlighting idealistic influence, motivational encouragement, and intellectual stimulation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Servant leadership focuses on serving followers and creating an environment of trust and personal growth, while authentic leadership emphasizes integrity, self-awareness, and honesty as key pillars of leadership relationships. Situational leadership, as defined by Hersey and Blanchard (1974), highlights the need for flexibility depending on the maturity and needs of followers (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). Finally, strategic leadership is linked to the ability to plan for the long term, cognitive complexity, and managing uncertainty in complex environments (Rowe & Guerrero, 2018).

The methodological choice for this study was based on secondary qualitative content analysis, as the interviews with CEOs in Forbes are considered authentic sources that reflect their personal perceptions, strategies, and values (Bowen, 2009). The use of secondary data offers the possibility of a thorough interpretation of the meanings that emerge from the leaders' narratives, without the need to collect primary material, while at the same time allowing for comparative contrast (Bryman, 2016). The key thematic indicators that guided the analysis were leadership philosophy, human resource strategies, organizational resilience, innovation, and values, allowing for the extraction of coherent and theoretically grounded conclusions.

The findings revealed three fundamental values that run almost horizontally through the leadership practices of CEOs: authenticity, adaptability, and innovation. Authenticity is expressed through a commitment to honesty, transparency, and consistency, elements that strengthen the trust of followers and create psychological security (Tsipouri et al., 2024). Adaptability is a key feature, as leaders recognise the need for constant readjustment in fluid and uncertain conditions (Xanthopoulou et al., 2022). Finally, innovation is promoted not only as a strategic choice but also as an organizational culture that encourages collective learning and experimentation without fear of failure. At the human resource management level, CEOs emphasized

the importance of empowerment, psychological safety, and diversity. Leadership behaviors characterized by empathy, transparency, and communication are positively associated with job satisfaction and commitment (Cahyo et al., 2021). At the same time, leaders' involvement in training, mentoring, and talent development policies enhances the sustainability and resilience of organizations (Sethibe & Steyn, 2018). The human-centred approach is interpreted as a strategic choice with a long-term positive impact on performance and staff retention (Gardner et al., 2021). With regard to crisis response, the analysis showed that most CEOs perceive crises not only as a threat but also as an opportunity for renewal. Through strategic adaptability and investment in dynamic capabilities, organizational resilience is achieved, a finding that is also confirmed in the literature. CEOs acted as catalysts for communication, providing direction and calm in times of uncertainty, which is consistent with the findings of strategic leadership theory (Rowe & Guerrero, 2018). Fostering innovation and a culture of learning was another critical focus. CEOs who encourage experimentation, decentralized decision-making, and the enhancement of collective intelligence manage to create environments that promote creativity and adaptability. Strategic investment in technology, knowledge, and collaborative networks emerged as a key catalyst for continuous innovation. At the level of values, it has been observed that ethical principles such as transparency, honesty, and social responsibility are incorporated into strategic decisions and form the foundation for strengthening corporate culture. CEOs act as cultural architects, shaping systems of meanings and behaviors that align human resources with strategic goals (Zhang et al., 2025).

The contribution of the study lies in highlighting the practical and philosophical frameworks that make up contemporary leadership at a global level. On a theoretical level, the research confirms the importance of combining different leadership models and highlights their complementarity. On a practical level, it provides valuable insights into how companies can enhance resilience, innovation, and effectiveness by adopting human-centered and value-based approaches. However, the study is not without limitations. The analysis of secondary data, based on journalistic interviews, carries the risk of incomplete coverage of topics and interpretative bias (Heaton, 2008). Despite efforts at methodological systematization, the heterogeneity of the available material created asymmetries in the analysis. Future research could use primary data, such as in-depth interviews or case studies, to enrich comparative understanding and examine the dynamic evolution of leadership approaches.

In conclusion, this study showed that top CEOs develop their leadership strategies through a network of values, adaptability, and innovation. Authenticity, human resource empowerment, and strategic insight emerge as fundamental pillars of effective leadership in the 21st century.

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