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Leadership in irregular warfare: integrating adaptive, empowering, complexity, and authentic approaches

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ABSTRACT

Leaders in irregular warfare operate in environments where authority is contested, information is fragmented, and cooperation cannot be imposed by rank alone. This article integrates military leadership experience and organizational theory to examine how contemporary approaches – such as adaptive, empowering, and complexity leadership – function under irregular warfare. Drawing on insights from Generals Petraeus, Mattis, and McChrystal, we develop a conceptual framework outlining antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and contextual conditions that shape leadership effectiveness in volatile environments. By combining leadership theory with case analyses of modern conflicts, the framework offers guidance for developing leaders who can earn cooperation, operate through decentralized networks, and maintain legitimacy.

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Introduction

Irregular warfare (IW) has become a crucial feature of contemporary conflict in the 21st century. It involves asymmetric competition, dispersed networks, and environments where influence can outweigh firepower, and outcomes are judged less by territorial control than by cooperation and legitimacy. Despite extensive doctrine on IW, leadership failures repeatedly undermine legitimacy, relationships and coordination in modern conflicts. This paper contributes directly to current debates on IW leadership by presenting a theory-driven framework that connects individual, organizational, and contextual dimensions of command in asymmetric environments.

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Unlike conventional warfare with clear frontlines, IW unfolds in uncertain and fluid environments shaped by non-state actors and local cultural dynamics. Thus, ambiguity is persistent in IW because authority and legitimacy are contested, and key actors cannot simply be ordered into compliance.[1] In this article, we treat IW as a struggle between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence among affected populations. Within this broader category of IW, counterinsurgency (COIN) is one specific subset – a state's effort to defeat an insurgent movement embedded within the population. COIN is therefore not synonymous with IW, but it highlights IW's defining feature: that influence over people, rather than the control of territory, determines outcomes. We use COIN cases because they map directly onto the leadership mechanisms (trust-building, decentralization, cultural mediation) developed in our framework. In IW, legitimacy and influence are shaped through negotiation rather than command, and COIN operations make these dynamics visible in ways that are analytically useful.

Over the past two decades, US and NATO operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed the limitations of rigid hierarchical leadership structures. As insurgent groups adapt and merge into local populations, military leaders find themselves operating in culturally divided environments where information is incomplete and alliances are often uncertain. These environments demand leadership approaches that move beyond traditional command and integrate adaptive, empowering, complexity-based, and authentic principles – an issue this paper addresses directly.

Traditional military leadership is rooted in predictability, uniform discipline, and centralized control.[2] In IW, this kind of rigidity becomes a weakness. Leaders are expected to act not only as commanders but also as mediators, negotiators, and community figures in settings where influence can be just as important as combat. Historical cases illustrate this clearly. In Indochina, rigid command structures and fractured political – military direction eroded credibility and prevented the French from adapting to a shifting social and political landscape.[3] By contrast, in the Dhofar campaign, British officers working with the Sultan's forces adjusted their leadership style to local conditions, earned the confidence of key intermediaries, and gradually shifted the population's alignment.[4]

This paper argues that a dedicated framework is needed because existing work tends to treat IW leadership either as doctrine or as isolated traits, rather than as an integrated set of mechanisms linking leaders, organizations, and context. Building on theoretical perspectives and examining the experiences of military leaders such as Petraeus, Mattis, and McChrystal, this study provides a conceptual framework for effective leadership in IW. Even though each leader brought a distinct personality and strategic approach, they consistently highlighted the importance of cultural understanding, ethical conduct, decentralized decision-making, and cross-functional cooperation. We

argue that these traits are not negligible, they lie at the heart of achieving lasting success in complex and unpredictable operational contexts.

The proposed framework is structured as follows:

- *Antecedents*: Cultural intelligence, psychological resilience, ethical integrity, and learning orientation.
- *Mediators*: Trust-building, mission command, cultural mediation and operational cohesion.
- *Situational Factors*: Conflict complexity, environmental uncertainty, and information environment.

These components are embedded within a dynamic structure, accounting for VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environments.[5] In these challenging settings, strategic adaptability, unit morale, and legitimacy with the local populations are crucial indicators of leadership effectiveness.

Despite a growing awareness of IW's unique demands, military leadership doctrines continue to follow conventional models. Leadership development programs still prioritize linear operational planning and top-down command instead of adaptation, improvisation, and empathy.[6] This gap leaves leaders underprepared to navigate conflicts where civilian populations are central to both the conflict and the solution. Previous studies have indeed examined effective leadership in VUCA settings, yet these have remained largely descriptive, focusing on tactical lessons or personality traits rather than building a unified conceptual model.[7] This paper extends that work by developing a theory-based but practice-oriented framework that connects contemporary leadership theory with the operational nuances of IW. We move beyond isolated case analysis by linking leader attributes, processes, and outcomes within a single, integrated model. In doing so, the paper contributes to both leadership and military studies by translating well-established leadership concepts into the IW context. It offers a structured framework that helps explain *how* effective leaders achieve trust and influence in decentralized conflicts. Specifically, it aims to: a) analyze case studies of successful leaders in IW environments b) integrate contemporary leadership theories into the military context; and c) propose a model linking leader traits, operational processes, and IW-related outcomes.

This paper draws on military doctrine, strategic assessments, and existing literature to identify key patterns and variables that shape effective leadership in IW. Using both theoretical and practical perspectives allows the framework to remain conceptually strong while staying closely connected to real operational challenges.[8] While the framework is tailored to military IW, we aim to extend its relevance to non-military contexts like humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations, where decentralization and adaptability are key to success.

We open with cases from Iraq and Afghanistan to show how IW rewards leaders who can secure cooperation, manage uncertainty, and delegate authority. We then examine contemporary leadership approaches – empowering, adaptive, complexity, and authentic leadership – to explain the mechanisms that allow leaders to retain initiative, legitimacy, and influence under IW conditions. Finally, we identify the individual leadership capabilities that enable these approaches to function in practice, focusing on adaptability, ethical integrity, cultural intelligence, and psychological resilience. Building on these insights, we introduce a conceptual framework tailored to the demands of IW. The discussion then expands to consider the theoretical and practical implications of the proposed model, highlighting its relevance for leadership development. Finally, we summarize the core contributions and propose directions for future research. By combining insights from organizational behavior, military leadership, and systems theory, this study bridges academic and practitioner perspectives. It contributes to the growing recognition that leadership in IW must be understood not as a set of traits but as a dynamic social process that links ethics, adaptability, and institutional learning.

Leadership in irregular warfare

This section looks at the main features of IW and compares traditional military leadership with four modern approaches: empowering leadership, adaptive leadership, complexity leadership, and authentic leadership. Each offers useful guidance for leading in these challenging environments. IW, as defined by the US Department of Defense,[9] involves 'a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations'.[10] The key characteristics of IW include asymmetrical tactics, decentralized operations, close interaction between civilian and military spheres, and political competition that takes precedence over traditional battlefield control.[11] The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria have highlighted that success in IW is closely linked to the ability to achieve influence. In population-centric forms of IW, civilians are not passive bystanders: their cooperation (or resistance) directly shapes operational space and determines what leaders can or cannot achieve.[12] While the centrality of civilians is characteristic of COIN campaigns, IW more broadly includes proxy conflicts, hybrid warfare, and state competition where civilian dynamics vary significantly. This shift means senior commanders set the intent and boundaries, while field leaders apply them on the ground with local actors, partner forces, and civilian groups. In this paper, 'commander' refers to leaders at two connected levels. Theatre-level commanders set strategic intent in accordance and symbiosis with political objectives already set by higher authorities, and coordinate this across

military, civilian, and partner domains. Operational and tactical leaders apply these directives in direct contact with local actors, where decisions must be made quickly and relationships determine access. Leadership in IW emerges from how strategic guidance and on-the-ground judgment work together, not from a single tier of command. Following Freedman, command should be understood as a political function balancing authority, legitimacy, and decision-making under uncertainty.[13]

Conventional leadership models were suited to structured environments with clear objectives and defined roles. In conventional warfare, this clarity of roles and top-down decision-making can produce efficient execution. However, in IW, such rigidity often becomes a liability. These environments are characterized by ambiguity, fragmented authority, and the need for culturally informed decisions at the tactical level. Junior leaders often hold the most accurate situational awareness, but traditional hierarchies restrict their ability to act, producing slow responses that alienate local actors and waste opportunities.

US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed how conventional hierarchies often delayed decision-making, limited situational flexibility, and undermined local trust. For example, decisions requiring centralized approval frequently missed critical windows to engage communities or respond to local developments. In Helmand Province, efforts to gain civilian support were often hampered by headquarters-level approval chains that failed to reflect ground realities.[14] Rigid command structures also suppressed initiative from junior leaders, who were often closer to the problem and better positioned to act quickly. This paper addresses that gap by proposing an integrative framework for effective leadership in IW. Drawing from empowering, adaptive, complexity, and authentic leadership theories, it offers a multidimensional model of how leaders operate in VUCA environments where influence, trust, and adaptability are decisive. Practically, the framework provides a structured way to improve leader development, assessment, and reward systems in defense institutions. While each leadership theory offers a valuable perspective on influence and adaptability, their integration provides a more comprehensive basis for understanding how leadership functions across the cognitive, ethical, and relational demands of IW.

Examples of effective leadership in IW

To understand how these mechanisms function in practice, it is necessary to examine commanders who operated in irregular environments. Their actions show how authority, legitimacy, and adaptability were exercised when formal hierarchy was insufficient. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as NATO's interventions under asymmetric conditions, provided a proving ground for new leadership paradigms. This section examines the leadership practices of

three prominent strategic-level commanders (Petraeus, Mattis, and McChrystal) who operated in high-stakes IW environments. Their decisions created conditions in which subordinate leaders could act with autonomy and credibility.

David Petraeus

General David H. Petraeus is recognized for his role in redefining US counterinsurgency doctrine during the Iraq War. As commander of Multi-National Force – Iraq in 2007, Petraeus led the implementation of the US troop 'surge' and operationalized a new approach to IW focused on population security, civil-military cooperation, and legitimacy-based warfare.[15] Central to Petraeus's command doctrine was the development of *Field Manual 3–24: Counterinsurgency*, which emphasized cultural understanding, decentralized operations, and civilian protection. He directed his subordinates to 'live among the population', shifting the strategic focus from killing insurgents to winning the support of local communities. Company commanders were given room to negotiate and engage with local stakeholders, from sheikhs to reconstruction teams, a form of mission command that relied on personal initiative. This delegation served less to create morale and more to reduce latency: commanders closest to the population could act without waiting for headquarters approval. At the operational level, Petraeus's coordinated a vast array of stakeholders, including Iraqi tribal leaders, US State Department officials, non-governmental organizations, and coalition forces. His ability to lead across domains and to delegate autonomy while maintaining strategic coherence was instrumental to the temporary stabilization of Iraq during the surge period.[16]

James Mattis

General James N. Mattis approached IW through ethical restraint and cultural intelligence. As a commander, Mattis insisted that Marines understand local customs and social structures before applying force.[17] A central component of Mattis's leadership was the emphasis on cultural sensitivity and ethical decision-making training. His instruction on cultural norms and tribal dynamics was not humanitarian padding: it was designed to reduce friction with civilians. Mattis believed that understanding local culture was critical for building trust, avoiding unnecessary confrontation, and achieving long-term strategic objectives. Moreover, Mattis implemented what he called a *strategic corporal* model. At its core, this concept challenges conventional top-down command models by emphasizing the need to empower junior leaders, those closest to the ground – to make timely,

informed decisions, thereby enhancing operational effectiveness and responsiveness in complex environments. In Fallujah (2004), Mattis chose to delay a major offensive in order to allow tribal negotiation and civilian evacuation. The decision was criticized politically, but it preserved relationships with intermediaries whose cooperation would otherwise have collapsed.[18] Mattis's leadership emphasized restraint and trust, enabling Marines to operate among populations, reinforcing the ethical dimension of leadership in IW.

Stanley McChrystal

General Stanley A. McChrystal transformed how US forces approached irregular conflict. As Joint Special Operations Commander (JSOC) in Iraq from 2003 to 2008 and he confronted an adversary that operated as a distributed network. Traditional command-and-control slowed response cycles and produced information silos that Al-Qaeda exploited. The speed, ambiguity, and interdependence of modern IW demanded a different kind of leadership: one that emphasized adaptability, shared cognition, and decentralized execution. Under McChrystal, JSOC moved from a 'need-to-know' to a 'need-to-share' information environment, linking intelligence analysts, operators, and planners in real-time collaboration. His 'team of teams' approach redefined the relationship between leadership and control, trading rigid command for empowered execution within a shared strategic framework.

In Afghanistan, McChrystal applied this philosophy to conventional forces as well, stressing partnership with Afghan forces, restraint in the use of force, and local engagement. Rather than tightly controlling decisions from the top, McChrystal sought to build trust and shared intent across autonomous teams. Tactical operators were given broader latitude to act, provided their actions aligned with the strategic objectives of the campaign. Front-line units were encouraged to take initiative and innovate without waiting for hierarchical approval. As McChrystal later reflected, his goal was to replace command authority with empowered execution, built on shared values and transparent communication.

Each commander applied different methods to the same underlying demands of IW: securing cooperation, managing uncertainty, and enabling decentralized action. These examples show that IW rewards leaders who can generate legitimacy among actors who are not under military authority and who can align dispersed teams without relying on rigid hierarchy. These cases show how IW leadership works in practice, but they do not explain why such approaches succeed. To explain why these approaches generate operational advantages (and under what conditions) they must be understood through contemporary leadership frameworks.

Leadership approaches relevant to irregular warfare

To explain *why* the approaches used by Petraeus, Mattis, and McChrystal proved effective, the following section examines four complementary leadership frameworks: empowering, adaptive, complexity, and authentic leadership. These four approaches were selected because they directly address the core constraints of IW: decentralized action, legitimacy, uncertainty, and dispersed information.

Empowering leadership

Empowering leadership matters in IW because junior leaders are often the ones who possess the most accurate situational awareness. Decisions made at the tactical edge cannot wait for centralized approval. Empowering leadership provides a structured way to delegate autonomy while preserving strategic intent.[19] Empowering followers is not just about delegating tasks, rather, it represents an effort to build trust, and enable adaptive performance in complex and dynamic environments.[20] In military settings, empowering leadership is more commonly associated with the concept of *mission command*: an operational philosophy widely adopted by NATO and US Army that emphasizes trust-based delegation, intent-driven autonomy, and disciplined initiative.[21] Instead of giving detailed orders for every action, commanders focus on explaining the mission's goals and overall intent. This allows junior officers and soldiers to make their own decisions as situations change. In IW, where threats are unpredictable and spread across many small areas, this approach helps units react quickly without waiting for higher approval.[22] For example, during counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, patrol leaders often had to adjust plans on the spot to deal with local resistance or civilian concerns. Similarly, in Iraq, small special operations teams used mission command to coordinate with local allies and respond immediately to shifting enemy movements rather than waiting for instructions from headquarters.

This approach naturally connects to empowering leadership. Leaders who empower others signal confidence in their team, which in turn strengthens psychological safety, initiative, and mutual accountability.[23] Empirical studies have consistently shown that empowering leadership enhances team learning behavior and adaptive problem-solving, especially under conditions of ambiguity and change.[24] It also fosters intrinsic motivation and facilitates creative engagement, both of which are critical in IW where solutions often have to be developed quickly and adapted to unpredictable conditions.[25] McChrystal's *Team of Teams* approach in Iraq and Afghanistan exemplified empowering leadership: he dismantled hierarchical silos, decentralized authority, and promoted transparent

information flows. In turn, this enabled a networked force capable of reacting quickly to changing threats.[26] In IW, failing to empower subordinates can lead to disastrous consequences. Leaders who cling to control may inadvertently slow decision cycles and demoralize their teams. Conversely, armies that operate with shared intent and mutual trust can move faster and adapt more effectively than an enemy with greater technological advantages. In IW, empowering leadership allows units to operate independently without losing alignment with command intent.

Adaptive leadership

While empowering leadership focuses on granting autonomy and fostering trust so that individuals can take initiative within a shared mission, adaptive leadership goes a step further by helping teams confront complex, evolving problems that cannot be solved through established procedures. In IW, the two are complementary: empowerment provides the freedom to act, while adaptability ensures those actions evolve in response to changing realities. First conceptualized by Heifetz, adaptive leadership emphasizes a leader's ability to mobilize people to tackle tough challenges for which the solutions are not readily obvious.[27] It differentiates between technical problems, which can be solved with existing knowledge, and adaptive challenges, which require learning and experimentation. Adaptive leadership is not about providing answers from the top, but about creating the conditions for learning and collaboration to solve complex problems without obvious solutions. Within this context, a leader's role is about guiding teams through uncertainty and discomfort.

Heifetz distinguishes adaptive leadership from authoritarian approaches: traditional leadership assumes the leader has the answers, while adaptive leadership acknowledges that solutions must emerge via collective adaptation. This makes it especially relevant in IW, where leaders are often required to adjust tactics and empower subordinates to act independently. Petraeus's counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq illustrate adaptive leadership: his shift toward population-centered operations reflected an adaptive response to operational failure. Drawing on lessons from previous campaigns, such as the British experience in Malaya and earlier U.S. work in Vietnam, Petraeus reframed strategy around securing and supporting local communities, rebuilding governance, and exercising patience to achieve stability.[28] Such strategy emphasized working with local communities, supporting reconstruction efforts, and showing patience to build long-term stability. Petraeus's decision to work with local Sunni tribal leaders during the 'Anbar Awakening' was an adaptive response to growing tensions. Realizing that orders from the top would not be enough, he backed local reconciliation

efforts, paying and integrating former insurgents (i.e. the Sons of Iraq) into local security forces. The approach was risky and controversial, but it helped cut violence in several provinces and showed how a leader could adjust military strategy to match conditions on the ground.[29] These efforts exemplify how adaptive leadership works not just at the conceptual level, but as a practical response to real-time complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Complexity leadership

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) extends the idea of adaptability from individual leaders and teams to the entire organizational system operating in uncertain and rapidly changing environments. It sees leadership as a dynamic, interactive process that develops naturally within complex adaptive systems.[30] CLT presents a systemic perspective on leadership, viewing it as an emergent process that develops within complex adaptive systems, marked by uncertainty, decentralization, and continuous change.[31] Instead of focusing on individual leader's traits and behaviors, CLT is more concerned with *how* leadership emerges through dynamic interactions and collective learning across an organization.[32] CLT examines how systems self-organize and evolve in response to complexity. In IW, information is fragmented, action is decentralized, and no single unit has full situational awareness. Complexity leadership views leadership as a property of the network, not the individual; it emerges through interaction between teams that adapt to local conditions while remaining aligned with strategic intent.

Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is a contemporary leadership model based on self-awareness, transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing of information.[33] Unlike traditional leadership approaches that may depend on authority or charisma, authentic leadership stresses alignment between words and actions, emotional honesty, and integrity in navigating uncertainty and moral ambiguity.[34] In IW, ethical conduct is a critical condition of access. Operations are conducted in close contact with civilians and partner forces who do not respond to rank alone. Leaders preserve credibility with these actors by acting consistently with their stated intentions and using restraint. When they do not, cooperation collapses. Authentic leadership in IW therefore concerns the alignment between stated objectives, behavior, and the expectations of local audiences whose support determines freedom of action. Commanders often face decisions involving local alliances, civilian engagement, and proportional use of force. These conditions test personal integrity and organizational values. In such contexts, authenticity strengthens credibility and trust both within the units and with local stakeholders.

Mattis offers a straightforward example of authentic leadership in practice: he believed that ethical conduct and sound judgment were inseparable from effective command. His reminder to Marines to '*engage your brain before you engage your weapon*', where he urged Marines to carry out their mission in a way that honored both professionalism and humanity, sums up his views on ethical conduct during operations.[35] Mattis encouraged his officers to learn local customs and treat every interaction as an opportunity to build trust. He distributed reading lists on history, ethics, and strategy, arguing that moral preparation was essential. Like Petraeus, he believed that ethical awareness and respect for local populations were a crucial advantage. Overall, it could be argued that such consistent emphasis on ethical decision-making helped prevent abuses and improved relations with Iraqi communities, making operations more effective and less costly. Mattis showed that authentic leadership isn't just about personal integrity, it is about shaping a command culture built on trust, and accountability. It is important to note that authenticity in IW does not guarantee ethical outcomes; it provides a mechanism for preserving credibility when decisions must be made without full information.

These leadership approaches are not presented as universal principles of good management. They are examined here because each addresses a structural constraint specific to IW. *Adaptive leadership* shows how commanders respond when there is no technical solution and strategy must evolve through feedback from the field. *Complexity leadership* focuses on supporting decentralized action and coordination across units, which is essential in non-linear battlefields where information and authority must flow in real time. *Authentic leadership* sustains the trust and moral credibility that IW operations depend on, especially when legitimacy must be earned rather than imposed. Finally, *empowering leadership* supports these approaches by enabling subordinate initiative, a sense of ownership. This is reflected in the philosophy of mission command, which ensures that decision-making authority is delegated and aligned with the commander's intent. We argue that leaders in IW need to draw on all three models at once. They must be flexible and responsive without losing their ethical grounding and they should decentralize control while still maintaining unity and coordination. None of these approaches is sufficient on its own; their value in IW lies in how they interact to produce initiative, coherence, and legitimacy under contested conditions. This combined approach is reflected in the leadership practices of Petraeus, McChrystal, and Mattis. The framework developed builds on these insights to offer a practical model for effective leadership in IW settings. Overall, the theories discussed here emphasize that effective IW leadership is both relational and systemic. The next section builds on this foundation by identifying the individual capabilities that enable these forms of leadership to operate in practice.

Key leadership traits in irregular warfare

Leadership in IW is defined by the ability to shape the behavior of actors who are not compelled to obey. Commanders must gain cooperation from civilians, negotiate access with local power brokers, and maintain credibility with partner forces, because these relationships determine freedom of action and legitimacy. Tactical decisions therefore produce political effects, and leadership is measured by how effectively those effects reinforce the wider strategic narrative. While adaptability, cohesion, and ethical restraint are relevant in all military contexts, in IW they become determinants of operational access.

Adaptability

Adaptability, the capacity to shift strategies, roles, and behaviors in response to evolving conditions, is perhaps the most defining leadership trait in IW. Unlike conventional warfare, IW rarely presents clear problems with known solutions. Leaders are routinely called to make decisions under ambiguity, with partial information and under time pressure. Scholars associate adaptability with a leader's ability to think flexibly, regulate emotions, and make sense of evolving situations.[36] Adaptability is a strategic mindset that enables high performance under pressure. Adaptive leaders balance stability with flexibility: they provide clear direction while remaining open to feedback and innovation. Research shows that such leaders foster higher team learning, innovation, and resilience because they encourage experimentation and normalize change as part of organizational life.[37] Adaptability is not only a personal quality but also an institutional competence. Leaders model adaptive behavior that signals to subordinates that learning and flexibility are rewarded. Leaders who demonstrate adaptability tend to build resilient teams, sustain morale, and maintain legitimacy. Faced with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, McChrystal abandoned linear decision hierarchies and instead instituted real-time information sharing and decentralized execution, which significantly reduced decision-making time.[38]

Cultural intelligence

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) refers to a leader's capacity to function effectively across diverse cultural contexts and is composed of four dimensions: cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral. Cognitive CQ involves understanding cultural norms, practices, and social systems, while metacognitive CQ refers to a leader's awareness of and ability to regulate their own cultural assumptions and thought processes during interactions. Motivational CQ reflects the drive and interest to engage with different cultures, even in the face of uncertainty or discomfort. Finally, behavioral CQ is the ability to

adapt verbal and non-verbal behavior appropriately in culturally varied settings.[39]

In IW, CQ is a crucial leadership trait because success often relies less on military strength than on a leader's capacity to earn trust and operate effectively within complex social systems. Missions frequently take place among civilian populations divided by religious and/or ethnic identities, where misunderstanding can quickly undermine progress. In Iraq and Afghanistan, leaders with strong cultural awareness and interpersonal sensitivity were more successful in engaging village elders, interpreting local concerns and preventing actions that might inflame tensions. This allowed them to gain credibility and access to reliable human intelligence, a huge strategic advantage that could directly shape mission outcomes.[40]

Additionally, cultural intelligence plays a key role in enabling decentralized mission execution. Leaders frequently delegate decision-making to junior officers who then operate independently in unfamiliar environments. Those with high CQ are more likely to maintain situational awareness, make ethical decisions under pressure, and reinforce the broader mission's legitimacy. Thus, CQ is a key skill for leaders seeking sustainable outcomes in complex conflict zones with multiple actors. In Afghanistan, Mattis often carried a copy of the Quran, joined local tribal meetings, and advised his subordinates to 'first listen and then lead'.[41] Mattis showed an understanding that cultural respect was central to mission success and believed that lasting security depended on earning the trust of local communities as much as defeating insurgents. He built credibility and reduced friction between US forces and Afghan civilians. His approach helped prevent small cultural misunderstandings from escalating into hostility and showed that awareness and restraint could be as powerful as force.

Ethical integrity

IW often places military personnel in morally ambiguous situations, where the lines between military and civilians are blurred and actions can have extreme political repercussions. Ethical lapses, such as civilian casualties or prisoner abuse, can undermine a mission far more swiftly than defeat on the battlefield.[42]

This centrality of ethics aligns with both transformational leadership and ethical leadership theories. Transformational leaders are defined in part by their idealized influence, they act as moral compasses who inspire followers leading by example.[43] In IW, where junior soldiers frequently face unstructured, high-stakes ethical dilemmas, the leader's role in modeling ethical behavior is critical for maintaining cohesion and moral discipline. Ethical leadership, which stresses fairness, accountability, and role-modeling of moral conduct, similarly highlights the importance of consistent leadership in reducing the likelihood of misconduct.[44] Both models share a focus on

aligning actions with core values, leading with authenticity, and maintaining moral awareness. Authentic leadership theory supports the idea that leaders grounded in self-awareness and internal moral principles are more likely to foster organizational trust and reduce destructive behavior.[45] In IW, this translates into fewer strategic setbacks caused by unethical conduct and stronger, more durable relationships with allied forces and local communities.

Psychological resilience

Resilience in leadership refers to the ability to maintain emotional stability, cognitive clarity, and motivational strength in the face of adversity, uncertainty, or sustained pressure. In leadership literature, resilience is increasingly viewed as a critical predictor of effective functioning, particularly in volatile and high-stakes environments.[46] It involves traits such as emotional control, optimism, and the ability to recover quickly from setbacks. Resilient leaders adapt in the face of hardship. They stay focused on their goals, and keep calm under pressure, providing stability and confidence to those they lead. Organizational psychology research suggests that resilient leaders are more likely to foster psychological safety, encourage adaptive problem-solving, and prevent emotional contagion that can erode team morale.[47] They also exhibit cognitive flexibility, allowing them to reframe failures constructively and sustain engagement through prolonged uncertainty. These qualities are especially critical in IW contexts, where leaders operate in unpredictable environments, make decisions with limited or conflicting information and manage dispersed teams under extreme pressure. Leaders who remain steady during volatile moments set an example for others, reducing panic and encouraging thoughtful action when the stakes are high. In IW, resilience is less about endurance and more about maintaining stability moral consistency in the face of stress. Leaders who demonstrate these qualities enhance not just immediate performance but also the long-term credibility and unity of their teams.

These four leadership traits do not function as isolated virtues. Instead, they form an integrated profile particularly well-suited to the demands of IW. Each trait helps address a distinct operational challenge. However, we argue that their real value emerges in interaction: a leader high in cultural intelligence but lacking in moral clarity may secure local engagement yet lose credibility due to ethical missteps. Similarly, a resilient but inflexible leader might endure operational pressure but fail to respond effectively to changing alliances or evolving threats. These traits also shape unit behavior, inform command climate, and influence civil-military relations. At the collective level, they enhance a leader's ability to make rapid and ethically sound decisions under pressure, build trust with local populations, and maintain cohesion. Table 1 illustrates how each of these leadership traits aligns with a specific operational demand of IW and the outcome it enables.

Table 1. Proposed framework linking leadership traits with operational demands and outcomes in IW.

Leadership Trait	Operational Demand in IW	Outcome
Adaptability	Ambiguous threats; evolving alliances	Strategic agility; decision-cycle reduction
Cultural Intelligence	Local legitimacy; civil-military engagement	Trust-building; narrative dominance
Ethical Integrity	Moral ambiguity; media scrutiny	Civilian cooperation; ethical consistency
Psychological Resilience	High-stress, prolonged operations	Unit cohesion; emotional stability

A comprehensive model of leadership in irregular warfare

IW involves enemies who are decentralized, situations that change quickly, and political and social conditions that are often unclear. While uncertainty and rapid change exist in all forms of warfare, in IW they stem from civilian reactions, local alliances, and informal authority structures. Leaders must therefore manage legitimacy, influence, and cooperation, aside from tactical risk, because shifts in social support can alter the battlefield just as decisively. The earlier sections showed that these challenges call for a broader way of thinking about leadership, one that combines personal qualities, flexible organizations, and a deep awareness of contextual variables. The next section introduces a conceptual framework that brings these elements together to show what effective leadership looks like in IW.

The framework is grounded in four core components: antecedents (the leader's personal capacities and traits), mediating mechanisms (the leadership processes and behaviors that translate traits into action), situational moderators (factors and conditions that shape and constrain leadership), and outcomes (the performance markers of successful leadership in IW contexts). Although these elements may appear to follow a logical sequence, they are better understood as connected parts that influence one another continuously, rather than as separate stages that occur in a fixed order. The model assumes that successful leadership in IW is not merely a matter of individual excellence but of how well individual attributes are translated into effective action under complex and changing conditions. While several of the examples discussed come from COIN campaigns, the model addresses leadership demands present across IW more broadly. COIN is used here as a concrete expression of those demands, not as a synonym for IW. Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of the proposed theoretical framework for leadership in IW.

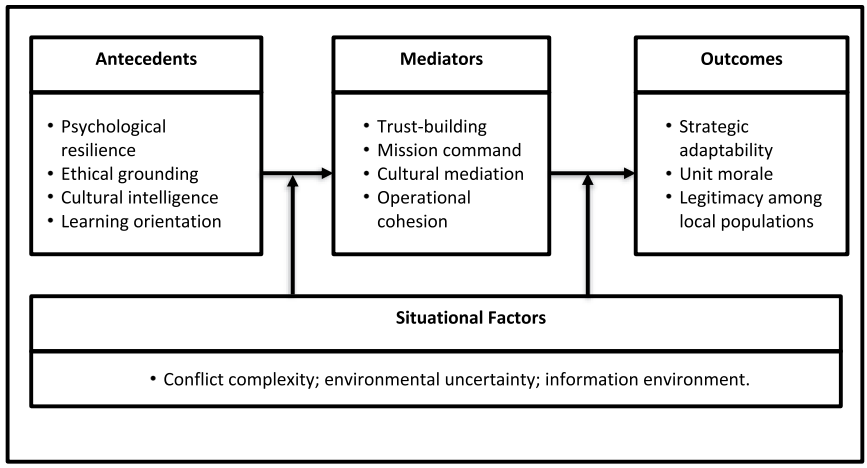

Figure 1. Theoretical model for leadership in irregular warfare.

Antecedents: key skills of the IW leader

In the proposed framework, the antecedents refer to the intrinsic qualities and competencies that leaders bring to the table. These are not learned in moments of crisis, they are developed over time and tested under pressure. Four core antecedents are especially critical in IW: psychological resilience, cultural intelligence, ethical integrity, and a learning-oriented mindset.

Psychological resilience matters in every form of warfare. In IW, the pressure comes from a different direction. Leaders operate in environments where feedback can be slow and inconsistent. There are few clear indicators of success, and gains can disappear overnight when a partner changes side or a local network withdraws cooperation. Resilience in IW is therefore not only about enduring stress, but about maintaining judgment and credibility when progress is slow and trust is fragile. Leaders must absorb uncertainty, continue to negotiate with actors who may be hostile or unreliable, and sustain the operation without the psychological reinforcement that victories in conventional warfare can provide.

Equally important is *cultural intelligence*, which refers to the leader's capacity to interpret unfamiliar norms, communicate across cultural divides, and adjust behavior in ways that promote trust and rapport. In IW, the battlefield is also a political and social space. Misunderstanding local customs or failing to recognize social hierarchies can quickly undermine hard-won legitimacy. An example of what happens when cultural understanding is missing comes from the early years of the US campaign in Afghanistan. Many coalition troops had little awareness of local customs or tribal politics, and their actions sometimes caused anger instead of cooperation. During a 2002 operation in Uruzgan Province, US forces mistakenly attacked a wedding party after

confusing celebratory gunfire with hostile fire, killing dozens of civilians.[48] Incidents like this deeply offended local communities, damaged trust, and made it easier for the Taliban to gain support. It showed that without cultural awareness, even well-planned missions can quickly turn into strategic setbacks.

Ethical integrity is another necessity in irregular warfare. IW often blurs the line between combatants and civilians, creates moral uncertainty, and exposes soldiers to difficult ethical choices. In these settings, leaders are called to set and model a clear moral standard that guides behavior even when formal rules are unclear.[49] Ethical integrity in IW is not only a matter of personal virtue or professional reputation; it is the guarantee that civilians and partner forces will not be humiliated, betrayed, or publicly exposed. In IW, even a single incident of mistreatment or abuse can close doors, dry up information sources, and push communities toward insurgent networks, regardless of tactical results. When moral standards are ignored, the results can be disastrous. In 2010, the release of the 'Collateral Murder' video by WikiLeaks revealed footage from a 2007 US Army Apache helicopter attack in Baghdad that killed at least 12 people, including two Reuters journalists, and injured several others, including children. The video showed aircrew misidentifying a group of men (some carrying cameras) as insurgents and engaging them without clear confirmation of hostile intent. The release of this footage caused international outrage, and severely damaged public support for the US operations in Iraq.[50] Incidents like this show that ethical lapses can carry enormous costs because it undermines legitimacy and erodes trust with local populations, giving adversaries easy propaganda assists.

When forces honor agreements, and protect civilians, they are more likely to grant access to information and cooperate. For example, in parts of southern Afghanistan, allegations of extortion and abuse by Afghan Local Police units were followed by a decline in civilian reporting and reduced freedom of movement for coalition forces, conditions that insurgent groups were quick to exploit.[51] This shows that ethical lapses can erode legitimacy and narrow the space for cooperation with local actors. Once credibility deteriorates, insurgents can leverage the resulting distrust, and restoring confidence becomes difficult.

Finally, IW leaders must possess a *learning orientation*. A learning orientation refers to a leader's mindset focused on growth, reflection, and continuous improvement. It involves curiosity, openness to feedback, and a willingness to adapt strategies in response to experience. Leaders with a strong learning orientation view mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than as failures to hide, and they encourage the same attitude within their teams.[52] In IW, this mindset is essential. Leaders must constantly interpret new information, reassess assumptions, and adjust to changing conditions on the ground. As Heifetz notes, adaptive leadership depends on recognizing

the difference between technical problems that can be solved with existing procedures and adaptive challenges that demand creativity, experimentation, and humility.[53] Petraeus's willingness to reassess assumptions, rewrite doctrine, and shift strategy in Iraq demonstrated this capacity in practice.[54] Leaders without such a mindset are likely to double down on failing tactics, misread evolving threats, or alienate local partners. Across these traits, what defines effective IW leaders is not perfection of skill but a mindset of humility, reflection, and openness to change.

Mediating mechanisms

While antecedents form the foundation of leadership, they must be translated into concrete behaviors and actions that allow leaders to shape outcomes effectively. These mechanisms translate internal capacities into tangible effects. The most critical mediators in IW leadership are trust-building, decentralized decision-making, cultural mediation, and operational cohesion, which we discuss below.

Trust in IW operates on two levels. Inside the unit, commanders must trust subordinates to act responsibly when they are given autonomy, and subordinates must trust that their leaders will not abandon them when they exercise judgment. Teams with high levels of trust communicate more openly, share information faster, and make better decisions under pressure.[55] This internal trust enables mission command and prevents hesitation at the tactical edge. However, we argue that IW adds a second layer of trust: from those outside the chain of command. Civilians, local intermediaries, and partner forces must believe that the commander's promises are credible and that cooperation will not expose them to danger. When that external trust is absent, local support is undermined – regardless of how cohesive the unit is. In IW, therefore, trust is not simply about morale or team dynamics; it is a crucial condition that makes operations possible in the first place.

Another crucial mechanism is decentralized decision-making, or what the military often refers to as *mission command*. In IW, rigid approval chains undermine effectiveness because authority is negotiated, not assumed. Civilians and partner forces are free to delay or withhold cooperation, and when a decision moves slowly through hierarchy, insurgents use the gap to claim initiative and legitimacy. Centralized control, while intended to ensure consistency, becomes a liability in IW because local actors control access and grant cooperation. Commanders on the ground often know which leaders will meet them and which behaviors will be interpreted as hostile. Mission command addresses this by pushing discretion downward: senior leaders set intent and boundaries, while subordinates adjust their actions to local norms and relationships in real time. The value of mission command in IW is not just

speed alone, but the ability to signal credibility to civilians and intermediaries while denying insurgents the opportunity to exploit delays or mixed messages.[56]

Cultural mediation describes the leader's ability to act as a bridge between different systems (e.g. military and civilian, foreign and local). In IW, leaders must reconcile conflicting priorities among diverse stakeholders This takes more than basic cultural knowledge; it requires empathy, good communication, and an understanding of how different organizations work. Petraeus's leadership during the Iraq surge showed this skill in practice. He helped coordinate cooperation between tribal leaders, local governments, US agencies, and coalition forces, which improved both security and community relations.[57] Leaders who lack this ability may either try to control local partners too tightly or give up too much authority, making it harder to achieve lasting results.

Finally, *operational cohesion*—the alignment of intent, messaging, and behavior across units and echelons – is essential in IW. Cohesion in IW means keeping actions, communication, and relationships consistent with the commander's intent so that civilians, intermediaries, and partner forces continue to cooperate. It is not about uniformity inside the unit, but about preventing mixed signals that lead local actors to withdraw support or even interpret operations as hostile. When cohesion breaks, insurgents exploit the gap and use it to frame the force as illegitimate. In practice, cohesion is created when different elements of the force act in ways that reinforce the same political and social signals. For example, patrol behavior matches what leaders promise to local elders, and partner units are not encouraged to use tactics that undermine population engagement. This kind of alignment preserves credibility in contested areas, which is why cohesion in IW is a strategic requirement rather than an internal morale issue.

Situational moderators and contextual factors

The operational environment creates limits and pressures that affect how well different leadership traits and behaviors work. These situational moderators, like resource limitations, political constraints, or shifting alliances, shape how a leader's qualities and actions translate into outcomes. They determine whether the same traits that succeed in one setting need to be adjusted or completely reinterpreted in another. One critical moderator is *conflict complexity*: the degree to which the IW environment involves multiple actors, overlapping identities, and contested narratives. As Hooker and Collins noted, the so-called 'long wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan were not single, unified conflicts but collections of interrelated struggles.[58] In these settings, leaders must remain adaptive and anticipate the wider effects of their decisions.

A second moderator is *environmental uncertainty*, which includes political instability, shifting alliances, and incomplete or unreliable information. In these conditions, leaders must find a balance between being patient and the need for immediate action, often operating without clear direction from higher command. Mattis's decision during the First Battle of Fallujah in April 2004 illustrates this challenge. Confronted with heavy civilian casualties and growing political pressure, Mattis chose to delay a full-scale assault and instead tried to negotiate with local tribal leaders and Iraqi security forces. Although controversial, his decision demonstrated restraint and an understanding that the use of force without legitimacy could undermine long-term objectives. Sound judgment under uncertainty requires moral courage and a willingness to accept political risk in the interest of strategic stability.[59]

Finally, the *information environment* directly influence how effective leadership is in IW. The same decision or behavior can produce opposite results depending on how it is perceived, framed, or exploited by different audiences. Public perception, especially in a media-saturated world, can turn a minor tactical event into a major strategic issue. Tactical operations to eliminate insurgents can become, in the eyes of regional audiences, an act of aggression, illustrating how mismanaging the narrative can undermine operational success. In contrast, when leaders actively manage communication and narrative, the information environment can work in their favor. McChrystal's emphasis on transparency and accountability during his command in Afghanistan helped rebuild some public confidence after reports of civilian harm, reinforcing his credibility with both Afghan partners and international observers.

In IW, managing the story is as important as managing the fight – leaders must balance tactical necessity with narrative awareness to maintain legitimacy and strategic coherence. Petraeus's efforts in Iraq, for instance, would have had limited impact if not paired with narrative efforts that reframed U.S. forces as protectors rather than occupiers.[60] Stavridis's use of strategic communication likewise showed how thoughtful messaging could strengthen the moral and cognitive impact of coalition actions.[61] Conversely, in Afghanistan, operational progress was often undermined by narrative setbacks, particularly after high-profile civilian casualty incidents, which demonstrated how fragile legitimacy can be when competing information streams shape public perception.[62]

The proposed framework recognizes that leadership traits and behaviors do not exist in isolation. Their effects are shaped by a constantly changing environment of perception and interpretation that can amplify or attenuate their intended outcomes. In IW, leaders must therefore think beyond actions alone: they must also consider how those actions will be perceived, framed, and potentially exploited by others. Hence, narrative awareness and control

become essential parts of effective leadership, ensuring that what is done on the ground aligns with how it is understood by both allies and adversaries.

Outcomes: indicators of leadership effectiveness in IW

Within the proposed framework, three primary leadership outcomes are identified: enhanced legitimacy, strategic adaptability, and sustained morale and cohesion. We argue that these outcomes serve as practical indicators of leadership quality. Together, they determine whether an IW campaign can sustain credibility, cohesion, and a clear sense of direction when operating under prolonged pressure.

Legitimacy refers to the perception among local populations, coalition partners, and domestic stakeholders that a leader is competent, just, and culturally responsive.[63] In IW, where leadership occurs within a network of military, political, and social relationships, legitimacy is a key determinant of influence and sustainability. It represents not only compliance or obedience but also voluntary alignment: the willingness of followers and partners to cooperate because they perceive the leader's actions as fair and morally grounded. From an organizational behavior perspective, legitimacy in IW operates similarly to organizational trust and leader credibility in civilian contexts, shaping motivation, cohesion, and discretionary effort within teams. In practical terms, legitimacy is built through ethical consistency, cultural sensitivity, and procedural fairness.

Leaders who engage communities in a transparent manner respect local customs and demonstrate genuine concern for civilians reinforce perceptions of integrity and shared purpose. These relational signals function as powerful antecedents to trust and cooperation, lowering resistance and reducing the risk of conflict escalation. Conversely, legitimacy is easily damaged by perceived hypocrisy or corruption which mirror violations of the psychological contract between leaders and followers.[64] Petraeus's focus on 'winning hearts and minds' during the Iraq surge illustrated how legitimacy could translate into operational success by gaining the confidence of local leaders and encouraging cooperation through community security programs.[65] Likewise, Mattis's insistence on cultural briefings and adherence to ethical standards reflected his belief that moral authority could not be separated from strategic effectiveness. Leaders who prioritize legitimacy in this way create organizational climates that foster trust, collective identification, and resilient performance, even under conditions of uncertainty and strain.[66]

Strategic adaptability is the capacity to adjust course of action when social dynamics or operational realities change, without losing sight of the campaign's overarching purpose. Although adaptability is required in any military context, in IW it is tested by human volatility (e.g. shifts in civilian sentiment and loyalty) rather than simply by tactical changes on the battlefield. Leaders

must adapt to how communities interpret their actions and how intermediaries negotiate access, because these shifts determine freedom of action as much as the enemy does. Leaders who show adaptability accept uncertainty as part of IW and build systems that encourage learning and initiative from all levels of the organization.

Petraeus showed this quality in Iraq when he helped write *Field Manual 3–24: Counterinsurgency*, which turned lessons from the field into new military guidance that focused on cultural understanding, flexibility, and protecting civilians. In a similar way, McChrystal reorganized the JSOC from a strict hierarchy into a *team of teams* model, allowing small groups to share information and act faster against Al-Qaeda. Both examples show how strategic adaptability depends on reflection, and the willingness to change strategy when conditions demand it. In practice, adaptability should be incorporated into leader performance evaluations, emphasizing learning agility and reflective judgment as key competencies.

Morale and cohesion are socio-psychological indicators of leadership effectiveness, especially relevant in IW's complex settings.[67] Morale sustains motivation, discipline, and optimism among troops, even when progress is nonlinear. Cohesion ensures that individuals and units across ranks and functions operate with shared purpose and trust. In decentralized environments, this unity allows junior leaders to act independently while remaining aligned with broader strategic goals – an idea consistent with the principles of mission command. More broadly, morale and cohesion function much like team identification and collective efficacy, fostering shared commitment and buffering against the stressors of high stakes work environments.[68]

It is important to note that these outcomes are not static but exist in a state of continuous interaction with both leader behavior and environmental conditions. They form a feedback loop through which leadership effectiveness is either reinforced or weakened over time. In dynamic IW environments where conditions shift rapidly, this feedback process becomes a central mechanism of adaptation. For example, increased legitimacy can generate a virtuous cycle: as local communities begin to trust the mission, cooperation improves, intelligence sharing becomes more reliable, and units can adapt their strategies more effectively. In turn, these adaptive successes further enhance the perception of legitimacy and strengthen cohesion across the organization.

Conversely, when morale declines (for example due to fatigue or perceived inconsistencies in leadership behavior) trust erodes, communication falters, and the capacity for decentralized decision-making weakens. Small failures in coordination or integrity can cascade into broader organizational dysfunction, especially in dispersed operations where cohesion and shared purpose are already under strain. This reflects the interdependence between leader-member exchange quality, collective trust, and adaptive performance, where breakdowns in one domain can destabilize the entire system.[69]

Understanding leadership in IW through this lens suggests that influence is an interactive social process shaped by exchanges between leader actions, follower perceptions, and contextual pressures.[70]

Discussion

The framework for effective leadership in IW presented here has important implications for both leadership theory and military practice. It calls for a shift away from traditional command-and-control approaches toward a more adaptive form of influence. Effective leaders in IW rely less on hierarchy and more on their ability to build trust and promote shared learning. This framework proposes leadership as a social process rather than a set of fixed traits. From a practical perspective, it offers guidance for military education and organizational design, emphasizing the development of flexibility, emotional intelligence, and cultural competence as essential leadership capabilities.

Ultimately, leadership in IW is not about exerting control but about enabling coherence aligning people and narratives toward a common purpose in the face of uncertainty and change. The goal is not to impose obedience, but to ensure that behavior, communication, and tactical decisions reinforce the commander's intent and the claim to legitimacy. When these signals are inconsistent, civilians withdraw support, giving insurgents the opportunity to fill the narrative space. Coherence, not coercion, is therefore the core function of leadership in IW. Leadership in these settings is measured by what independent actors do in response to the commander's choices, not what subordinates are ordered to do.

The cases of Petraeus, McChrystal, and Mattis discussed here also show that leadership in IW is not without controversy. Although each of these generals achieved important results, their careers attracted also significant criticism. For example, Mattis' actions in Fallujah raised questions about civilian harm and political consequences during the Iraq War.[71] Petraeus was later criticized for the way civil – military boundaries were handled and for decisions that blurred professional and personal judgment.[72] Effective leadership does not mean flawless leadership: competent, well-intentioned leaders sometimes operate under enormous pressure and are called to make difficult choices with limited information. These issues should be recognized as a limitation of the model proposed here. The framework highlights the value of adaptability and cultural understanding in IW, but it cannot fully capture the challenges and constraints that shape real decisions in the field.

Contributions to leadership theory

From a theoretical perspective, this study makes three key contributions to the evolving literature on leadership in non-traditional contexts. First, the

proposed framework demonstrates the value of synthesizing multiple leadership theories to address the challenges of IW. While these theories have typically been studied in isolation and often within corporate or civilian domains, their integration here illustrates how they can address different facets of complexity. Adaptive leadership speaks to the uncertainty and learning demands of IW; complexity leadership captures the decentralized nature of military operations; and authentic leadership is relevant to ethical and relational legitimacy.[73] Finally, empowering leadership highlights the importance of trusting subordinates with decision-making authority and fostering initiative across ranks, an essential requirement for environments where agility is crucial. Second, this framework extends leadership theory into the domain of defense and security studies, where leadership is often discussed in terms of authority or charisma but rarely through the lens of systemic mechanisms.

The framework advances a more contextualized understanding of leadership suited to VUCA environments.[74] It highlights that leadership effectiveness in such settings depends not only on individual traits or decision-making skills but also on the leader's capacity to interpret environmental signals and enable adaptive learning across the organization. Third, the model proposes a feedback-oriented understanding of leadership in which outcomes influence future conditions and reshape leadership behavior. Traditional leadership theories often assume linear causality (input → behavior → outcome), but in IW contexts a non-linear model in which leadership actions interact dynamically with environmental and social factors is required. Here, strategic success does more than achieve short-term goals: it reshapes stakeholder perceptions, redefines future constraints, and alters the broader operational landscape. This feedback-based view sees leadership as a changing process, not a simple chain of cause and effect. It fits with modern systems and complexity theories, which see organizations as adaptive systems where every outcome feeds back into the environment, shaping future challenges and opportunities for leaders.

Implications for military practice

The practical implications of this framework are important for how the military develops, evaluates, and rewards its leaders. Traditional training still focuses on command and control and tactical skills. These remain useful, but IW requires a different set of abilities. Leaders need cultural understanding, ethical judgment, emotional strength, and the ability to see the wider system they operate in. These skills should be built into all levels of leadership education. Case discussions of figures such as Petraeus, Mattis, and McChrystal can help show how these abilities make a difference in real conflicts. One of the main contributions of this

framework is its value for improving leadership assessment and reward systems. Many current military performance reviews still emphasize rule-following, short-term goals, and measurable outcomes. While these keep discipline, they can discourage creativity, reflection, and moral courage. In IW, success often depends on adaptability and long-term relationship-building, which are harder to measure, but nonetheless vital. Leadership evaluations should therefore include broader and more balanced tools, such as 360-degree feedback, realistic scenario exercises, and cultural awareness assessments.[75]

Reward systems should also recognize behaviors that support learning, cooperation, and ethical leadership, not just those linked to immediate mission results. This would better align incentives with the type of leadership IW demands. The framework also supports the use of decentralized leadership, consistent with mission command principles. IW shows that rigid hierarchies and slow decision chains can reduce effectiveness. Military organizations need structures that allow junior leaders to make quick, informed decisions within clear strategic intent.[76] Embedding mission command principles into officer promotion pathways would ensure that initiative and accountability are rewarded and actively encouraged.

Finally, this framework helps link leadership theory with everyday HR practices in the armed forces. By incorporating these ideas into both professional development and performance appraisal systems, military institutions can develop leaders who are not only tactically strong but also adaptable, resilient and ethical. IW is now a central part of modern conflict, and leadership models built only on control and predictability no longer fit. In order to remain effective, armed forces need to redesign their talent management and reward systems to value initiative, reflection, and cultural skill. Evaluation processes should move beyond compliance metrics and integrate developmental assessments that measure adaptability, ethical decision-making, and interpersonal influence. Adopting more empowering, adaptive, and authentic leadership styles is thus a strategic necessity. This framework also highlights a need for institutional reward systems that value learning and ethical leadership, not only mission output. By aligning HR systems, training design, and institutional culture with the adaptive demands of IW, this model provides a roadmap for long-term organizational resilience.

Applications beyond the military

While developed within a military setting, the proposed framework is relevant to many other fields that operate in complex and unstable environments.[77] Humanitarian organizations and peacekeeping missions operating in fragile regions often face challenges similar to those found

in IW. The response to the 2023 Turkey – Syria earthquake illustrates this clearly. Relief agencies, NGOs, and UN teams were forced to make independent decisions in contested areas, often with limited communication from headquarters. Effective leadership in this situation depended on decentralized authority, cultural awareness, and ethical decision-making, traits closely aligned with those emphasized in the IW framework discussed here.[78] We argue that operational success in volatile contexts depends less on centralized control and more on trust-based, empowering and adaptive leadership. These examples reinforce that leadership principles developed in IW are equally valuable in civilian crisis management, peacekeeping, and humanitarian response: any setting where uncertainty, decentralization, and ethical complexity define the operating environment.

Directions for future research

Although the framework presented in this paper is strongly theoretically grounded, it remains empirically untested. Future research should seek to operationalize the framework through field studies, leadership assessments, and longitudinal data collection in IW environments. Surveys, wargaming simulations, and ethnographic studies of unit cohesion and morale under different leadership conditions could provide evidence for the proposed framework. Particular attention should be paid to how leadership traits such as adaptability, cultural intelligence, ethical integrity, and psychological resilience manifest across different operational contexts. Examining variations in leadership approaches between small-unit tactical leaders and senior commanders could help refine the model's applicability at different levels of command.

Future research should also consider additional variables that may significantly shape leadership effectiveness in IW but were not explicitly integrated into the current framework. One such variable is organizational learning climate. The learning climate of an organization can be defined as the extent to which units are structured to reflect on failure, integrate feedback, and adapt over time.[79] In VUCA environments, units with strong learning cultures are better positioned to adjust their strategies and maintain legitimacy. Another overlooked factor is leader-follower congruence, or the alignment between a leader's values, communication style, and those of their team.[80] In IW settings, teams are often culturally mixed and made up of people from different agencies. When they are not aligned, distrust can grow. Studying how shared understanding and consistency among leaders and partners affect teamwork and performance in these joint or coalition settings would help deepen our understanding of how relationships shape leadership.

Emotional intelligence may also play a significant role, particularly in environments that require managing ambiguity, mediating local tensions, and fostering cohesion under psychological stress.[81] Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to read complex cues and respond constructively to volatile emotional climates, all of which are common in IW settings. Future research could also explore how leadership interacts with technological mediation, including reliance on intelligence tools and digital communications. While such tools enhance situational awareness, they may also reduce direct human engagement and make trust-building more difficult. Understanding how leaders balance technological assets with interpersonal influence is increasingly important. Finally, comparative studies across organizations (e.g. military forces, humanitarian agencies and peacekeeping operations) would help determine which elements of the framework are transferable across sectors. Understanding where leadership principles converge and diverge across these environments can enhance interagency coordination and contribute to more effective leadership preparation for future complex crises.

Conclusions

IW requires a complete rethink of what leadership means in practice. Traditional command models built on fixed authority struggle in IW because authority is not given automatically. Civilians, intermediaries, and partner forces can withdraw cooperation or deny access. If decision-making is rigid or slow, insurgents can exploit the gap to shape perceptions and claim legitimacy. This paper has argued that no single leadership theory can address these challenges. A more integrated perspective that brings together empowering, adaptive, complexity, and authentic leadership provides a stronger foundation for leading effectively in IW settings.

The framework developed here connects three levels of leadership influence. At the individual level, traits such as resilience, cultural intelligence, and moral integrity form the psychological base from which credible leadership develops. At the organizational level, trust-building, decentralized decision-making, and cohesion turn those personal qualities into shared capability. At the situational level, factors such as political volatility, fragmented information, and moral ambiguity shape how leadership is exercised in practice. What matters most is not technical mastery but the ability to sustain purpose and unity when structure and clarity are in short supply.

In this paper, we drew upon modern military experience to illustrate these points. Petraeus's work to build local trust in Iraq, McChrystal's efforts to decentralize operations, Mattis's insistence on moral discipline, all show leadership as a process of alignment and adaptation rather than command and control. These examples reveal that effective leaders in IW are those who

listen, interpret, and enable others to act within a shared understanding of mission and ethics. Ultimately, this framework does not offer a universal solution, but rather a strategic lens as a way of aligning leadership behavior with the messy realities of modern conflict. The model provides a foundation not only for military reform but for broader application in humanitarian, security, and crisis-response domains where complexity and uncertainty are the norm.

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