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# Toward a relational model of subtle leadership: Referent power as the core mechanism of influence

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## Abstract

Leadership scholarship continues to evolve amid complex organizational environments shaped by globalization, technological acceleration, workplace and workforce diversity, and heightened ethical expectations. While dominant paradigms emphasize visible behaviors and performance-oriented exchanges, leadership may also emerge through subtle relational mechanisms. This exploratory study examines Subtle Leadership, originally comprising seven dimensions (intrinsic motivation, authenticity, emotional intelligence, empowerment, integrity and trustworthiness, intuition, and referent power), and evaluates a refined model positioning referent power as the core mechanism of influence, predicted by the other six dimensions. Survey data from a consulting organization included colleague ratings of leaders (n = 49), team members (n = 45), and self-ratings from leaders (n = 5) and team members (n = 9). The newly developed instrument was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha, exploratory principal component analysis, correlations, sequential and multiple regression, and Mann–Whitney U tests. Referent power demonstrated excellent reliability and the most coherent component structure, while other dimensions showed greater overlap and weaker item-level support. The six dimensions explained 64% of referent power variance among leaders and 79% among team members. Authenticity was the most consistent predictor, followed by empowerment, particularly among team members. Intuition correlated moderately with referent power but added no independent explanatory value. Self- and colleague assessments showed no significant differences. Given the small samples, findings neither confirm the original multidimensional structure nor establish a higher-order latent structure, but suggest an internally grounded relational model with referent power as the core mechanism of influence.

***Keywords*:** Leadership Studies, Subtle Leadership, Referent Power, Relational Leadership, Authenticity, Empowerment

***JEL Classification:*** M10, M12, C38

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations increasingly require leadership approaches that foster collaboration, trust, adaptability, and relational stability in interconnected environments shaped by globalization, workforce diversity, technological acceleration, hybrid structures, and heightened ethical expectations. Yet many dominant leadership paradigms still emphasize visible behaviors, charismatic influence, formal authority, and performance-oriented exchanges as the primary mechanisms of effectiveness. Many effective leaders influence others not through positional dominance or visible displays, but through authenticity, emotional intelligence, empowerment, integrity, intuition, intrinsic motivation, and the relational legitimacy that underlies referent power. The problem addressed here is the limited integration of internally grounded and relationally embedded dimensions into an empirically operationalized leadership framework suitable for organizational assessment and development. Although conceptually articulated (Quiñones-González, 2022), Subtle Leadership had not been empirically operationalized or psychometrically examined; it lacked measurable dimensions, an instrument, organizational testing, and statistical examination of its relational structure.

The purpose of this study was to advance Subtle Leadership from conceptual articulation to exploratory empirical examination in an organizational context. Specifically, the study pursued five objectives: (1) operationalize the seven dimensions of the a priori model into measurable constructs; (2) develop and evaluate an assessment instrument; (3) examine preliminary reliability and factorial structure; (4) test the a priori hypotheses (H1–H9) by examining the extent to which the six relational dimensions are associated with referent power, which emerged as the core mechanism of influence, and compare self-perceptions with colleague perceptions of Subtle Leadership; and (5) articulate its potential relevance for organizational dynamics. Accordingly, the a priori model proposed that each of seven dimensions contributes to Subtle Leadership (H1–H7), that they do so jointly (H9), and that self- and colleague assessments are aligned (H8). Because referent power emerged empirically as the core mechanism of influence, the hypotheses were tested by examining the contribution of the six remaining dimensions to it. The results are therefore interpreted in terms of an empirically refined (post hoc) relational model, which is exploratory and not confirmatory.

The study contributes to leadership scholarship in four ways. First, it advances a referent-based conceptualization of leadership influence, positioning earned credibility and relational legitimacy, rather than formal authority, as the core mechanism of influence. Second, it offers exploratory evidence on how internally grounded dimensions relate to referent-based influence, with authenticity showing the most consistent association and empowerment a more moderate one. Third, by including intuition, it brings tacit, experience-based judgment into the study of leadership influence, although its independent contribution was not supported here. Fourth, it provides a preliminary operationalization of the construct, translated into an instrument evaluated by an

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expert panel and tested in two samples. Because the samples are small, the findings are exploratory and do not establish a confirmed structure. Grounded in abductive reasoning (Campos, 2011; Bamberger, 2018), these contributions represent an initial step toward a more nuanced, relational, and human-centered understanding of leadership influence—one rooted in who the leader is rather than the position they hold.

## 2. Literature Review

Subtle Leadership is positioned within the broader landscape of relational and authenticity-based leadership theories. Its distinctive contribution is a sharper anchoring in referent power, defined as influence derived from admiration, identification, and interpersonal credibility, as the central explanatory mechanism rather than a secondary outcome. It operates through perceived authenticity, emotional attunement, and earned legitimacy rather than positional authority or overt behavioral control (French & Raven, 1959; Yukl, 2013).

### 2.1 Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Positioning

Subtle Leadership was introduced as a theoretical paradigm that conceptualizes leadership as influence grounded in a high degree of referent power rather than formal authority or charismatic visibility (Quiñones-González, 2022). Subtle leaders do not exhibit the outward façade of traditional leaders whose authority derives from legitimate organizational power; their leadership may include passive, indirect, or even silent elements, described more recently as a "quiet ego" (Sexton & Walton, 2026). Referent power, originally defined by French and Raven (1959), rests on personal characteristics that generate admiration and identification: a leader high in referent power is liked and admired, and others seek to identify with that individual. Subtle Leadership encompasses personal traits and qualities developed through life experience, diverse environments and cultures, and holistic personal development grounded in moral principles, integrity, and service. It does not depend on public recognition, a designated following, or legitimate power from a formal position; influence emerges from the leader's character, values, experiences, and cultivated trust (Quiñones-González, 2022). It refines and integrates existing theories by repositioning influence as something that emerges gradually through relational resonance rather than through visible behaviors or formal authority structures.

### 2.2 Comparative Theoretical Foundations

Subtle Leadership is situated relative to four established theories to clarify its conceptual boundaries and points of convergence.

#### *2.2.1 Subtle Leadership and Transformational Leadership*

Transformational Leadership emphasizes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as mechanisms through which leaders elevate follower performance and commitment (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership relies on the

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visible articulation of vision and deliberate motivational influence, treating referent power primarily as an outcome of those behaviors. Subtle Leadership reverses this emphasis, conceptualizing referent power as the originating force of influence (Quiñones-González, 2022): through relational integrity, emotional intelligence, intuitive interpersonal calibration, and authentic presence, followers are gradually drawn through earned admiration and trust rather than "inspired into alignment." It thus reframes transformational influence from an expressive model into a relational accumulation model of referent power.

*2.2.2 Subtle Leadership and Authentic Leadership*

Authentic Leadership emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Subtle Leadership shares this foundation but treats authenticity as a socially validated source of referent power: it becomes influential insofar as followers recognize it, identify with the leader, and validate it emotionally. Subtle Leadership thus extends Authentic Leadership by theorizing the conversion of authenticity into referent power, with relational perception as a central mediating mechanism rather than an assumed outcome.

*2.2.3 Subtle Leadership and Servant Leadership*

Servant Leadership prioritizes moral commitment to serve others, emphasizing follower growth, humility, empathy, and stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant Leadership justifies influence by service orientation ("I serve you"); Subtle Leadership emphasizes relational outcome ("you identify with and trust me"). Service may contribute to referent power but is not its defining mechanism, which lies in how deeply followers internalize the leader as a trusted relational reference point.

*2.2.4 Subtle Leadership and Ethical Leadership*

Ethical Leadership focuses on normatively appropriate behavior and the promotion of ethical conduct through communication, reinforcement, and role modeling (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Subtle Leadership aligns with it in emphasizing integrity and trustworthiness but shifts attention from ethical compliance to the relational conversion of ethical credibility into referent power: moral behavior is necessary but not sufficient, and must be perceived and internalized to produce identification, admiration, and voluntary followership (French & Raven, 1959). Ethics thus becomes a relational currency that builds enduring referent legitimacy.

### 2.3 Integrative Theoretical Positioning of Subtle Leadership

Subtle Leadership occupies a distinct conceptual niche by elevating referent power as the central explanatory mechanism of influence. Grounded in the social power framework of French and Raven (1959) and later scholarship (Yukl, 2013), Subtle Leadership conceptualizes influence as relationally granted through admiration, trust, credibility, and voluntary identification, rather than

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through positional authority, coercion, transactional exchange, or charismatic performance alone. Its seven dimensions are not isolated traits but dynamically interconnected relational processes, which links the construct to relational leadership described as inclusive, empowering, caring, visionary, and ethical (Memon & Ooi, 2024) and to environments of psychological safety, interpersonal trust, and cohesion (George, 2000, as cited in Bonesso *et al.*, 2024). Its main theoretical contribution is a more nuanced account of how influence is relationally earned, emotionally experienced, and voluntarily sustained in contemporary organizations.

### 2.4 Dimensional Structure and Conceptual Framework

This study operationalizes Subtle Leadership as a higher-order construct composed of seven first-order dimensions, identified through a systematic review of the leadership and organizational behavior literature and theoretical reflection on Quiñones-González (2022). According to Sexton and Walton (2026), the development of internal dimensions offers deep leverage points for outer change. Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal sources of purpose, satisfaction, value alignment, or meaning rather than external rewards or pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Authenticity is acting consistently with one's values, beliefs, and identity, with transparent communication and genuine relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and express one's own emotions and to perceive and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Empowerment refers to behaviors that foster others' autonomy, initiative, and meaningful participation (Spreitzer, 1995). Integrity and trustworthiness reflect consistent honesty, reliability, ethical behavior, and moral accountability (Colquitt, *et al.*, 2007), regarded as a leadership superpower (Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, 2023). Intuition is recognizing patterns, interpreting signals, and judging from tacit knowledge and experience in complex, ambiguous situations (Klein, 1998; Dane & Pratt, 2007). Referent power is the ability to influence others through admiration, respect, and identification; those who possess it are role models whose values and behaviors others wish to emulate (Scandura, 2019).

Table 1 summarizes the dimensions, their theoretical foundations, and a representative item. The a priori model treats the seven dimensions as parallel first-order factors that reflect the higher-order construct, emphasizing its conceptual unity (Figure 1).

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**Table 1. Summary of Subtle Leadership Dimensions**

| Dimension | Citation | Example Item |
|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic Motivation | Deci & Ryan (2000) | "I am motivated to perform well because my work aligns with my values." |
| Authenticity | Kernis & Goldman (2006) | "I express my genuine thoughts in professional relationships." |
| Emotional Intelligence | Salovey & Mayer (1990) | "I recognize how emotions influence my behavior." |
| Empowerment | Spreitzer (1995) | "I encourage others to take initiative." |
| Integrity/ Trustworthiness | Colquitt, *et al.* (2007) | "Others trust me to act ethically." |
| Intuition | Dane & Pratt (2007); Klein (1998) | "I rely on intuition when interpreting workplace situations." |
| Referent Power | French & Raven (1959) | "Others are motivated to follow my example." |

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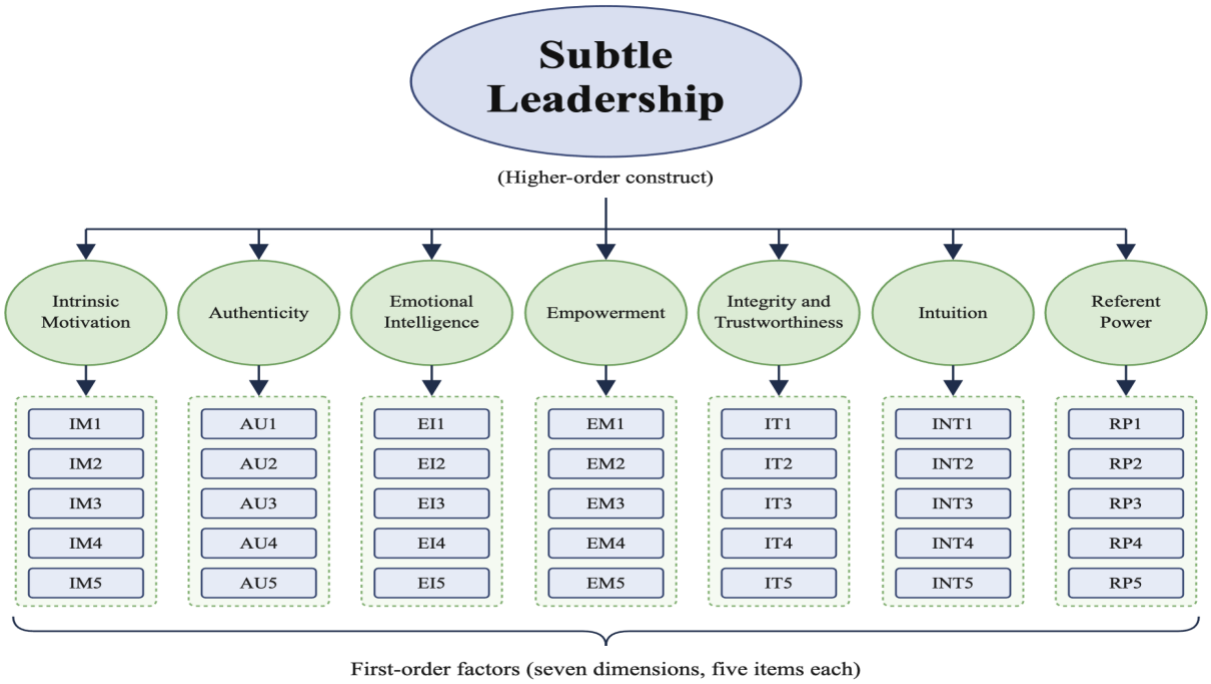
**Figure 1. A priori Seven-dimension Model of Subtle Leadership**




*Note.* This figure shows the proposed (a priori) model, with five items per dimension. After reliability analysis, one item was removed from Leaders' Emotional Intelligence scale (item 4) and one from Team members' Intrinsic Motivation scale (item 2), so each of those scales has four items in the analyses.

## 3. Hypotheses

In the proposed A priori Seven-dimension Model, Subtle Leadership is a latent construct reflected by seven first-order dimensions. Nine hypotheses evaluate the dimensions' contributions to the construct, perceptual alignment across evaluation sources, and the dimensions' collective contribution.

### 3.1 Contribution of First-Order Dimensions to the Higher-Order Construct

Hypotheses H1 through H7 evaluate whether each dimension functions as a reflective indicator of Subtle Leadership (Table 2). For each, the null hypothesis ($H_0$) proposes no significant loading, and the alternative hypothesis ($H_a$) proposes a positive and significant loading. H1: intrinsic motivation, H2: authenticity, H3: emotional intelligence, H4: empowerment, H5: integrity and trustworthiness, H6: intuition, and H7: referent power each load positively and significantly on the higher-order construct of Subtle Leadership. Because the sample sizes did not permit confirmatory testing of these loadings, H1–H6 were evaluated operationally as contributions to the prediction of Referent Power, and H7 was examined descriptively (Section 3.4).

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**Table 2. Summary of Hypotheses H1-H9 and Their Operational Tests**

| Hypothesis | Dimension/Contrast | Null Hypothesis | Alternative Hypothesis | Operational Test |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | Intrinsic Motivation | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |
| H2 | Authenticity | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |
| H3 | Emotional Intelligence | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |
| H4 | Empowerment | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |
| H5 | Integrity and Trustworthiness | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |
| H6 | Intuition | Does not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Contribution to Referent Power: sequential (Type I) ANOVA and full-model partial coefficients. |

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| Hypothesis | Dimension/Contrast | Null Hypothesis | Alternative Hypothesis | Operational Test |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H7 | Referent Power | Does not load on or contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Loads on and contributes positively and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Used as the criterion variable rather than as a predictor. |
| H8 | Self and Team-Member Comparison | Self-ratings and colleague ratings do not differ. | Self-ratings and colleague ratings differ significantly. | Mann–Whitney U (Wilcoxon rank-sum) test |
| H9 | Global Contribution of the Seven Dimensions | The seven dimensions, taken together, do not contribute significantly to Subtle Leadership. | The seven dimensions, taken together, contribute globally and significantly to Subtle Leadership. | Overall regression model ANOVA (F test), with Referent Power as the criterion variable, by sample. |

*Note.* The hypotheses are stated in terms of the a priori model (contribution of each dimension to Subtle Leadership). Because Referent Power emerged as the core mechanism of influence, the dimensions were tested as predictors of Referent Power, which operationalizes Subtle Leadership in the regression models H7 was examined descriptively (reliability and dimension-level component loading) because Referent Power served as the criterion variable in the regression models (see Section 3.4). All six remaining dimensions (H1–H6) were entered in the regression models in both samples. Sequential (Type I) tests are order-dependent; independent contributions are given by the full-model coefficients, whose sign indicates the direction of the effect. For H8 the research expectation corresponds to the null hypothesis; failure to reject it is reported as no significant difference detected, not as support.

### 3.2 Comparison of Self-Ratings and Colleague Ratings

H8: Leaders' self-ratings of Subtle Leadership do not differ significantly from colleague ratings of the same groups. Because a non-significant difference cannot establish equivalence, H8 is examined as an exploratory comparison: a non-significant result is interpreted as the absence of a detected difference, not as evidence of perceptual alignment.

### 3.3 Collective Contribution of Dimensions to the Overall Construct

H9: The six relational dimensions collectively contribute positively and significantly to the overall Subtle Leadership construct; operationally, they jointly explain a significant proportion of the variance in Referent Power.

### 3.4 Conceptual and Operational Formulation of the Hypotheses

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Hypotheses H1–H7 are stated conceptually, as loadings of each dimension on the higher-order construct of Subtle Leadership (Figure 1). Testing them in that form requires confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modeling, which the present sample sizes (n = 49 and n = 45) do not support. The hypotheses were therefore evaluated in two complementary exploratory ways. First, a dimension-level principal component analysis examined whether the seven-dimension scores load on a single dominant component, the closest exploratory analogue to the proposed loadings (Section 5.3). Second, H1–H6 and H9 were operationalized as associations with Referent Power, tested through sequential and multiple regression (Section 5.5). In operational form, H1–H6 state that each dimension contributes positively and significantly to the prediction of Referent Power, and H9 states that the six dimensions jointly explain a significant proportion of its variance. Support for an operational hypothesis therefore indicates association with Referent Power, not a confirmed loading on a latent construct.

Referent Power occupies a dual position in this study. In the a priori model it is one of seven first-order dimensions (H7); in the analyses it is the criterion variable; and in the post-hoc refined model it is the core mechanism with which the other six dimensions are associated (Figure 2). This shift has a theoretical and an empirical basis. Theoretically, Subtle Leadership is defined as influence grounded in a high degree of referent power (Quiñones-González, 2022), so Referent Power is both a component of the construct and the form of influence the other dimensions are expected to support. Empirically, Referent Power showed the highest internal consistency ($\alpha$ = .92 in both samples), was the only dimension whose items formed a single component, and loaded highest on the dimension-level component (.87 and .92). Because a variable cannot serve as both predictor and criterion in the same model, H7 was examined descriptively, through its reliability and dimension-level loading, rather than as a regression contribution. Since these empirical grounds come from the same data, the choice of Referent Power as criterion is itself exploratory and requires confirmation in an independent sample.

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Research Design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, exploratory design to examine the multidimensional structure of Subtle Leadership in a real organizational context. Because the construct had not previously undergone empirical operationalization or psychometric testing, the study emphasized exploratory examination rather than confirmatory validation. Data came from colleagues who rated leaders and team members and from leaders and team members who rated themselves, allowing preliminary comparison of self-assessments and external evaluations.

### 4.2 Participants and Organizational Context

Participants were recruited through nonprobability convenience sampling from an organizational development consulting firm in Australia, a setting that suits the study of relational leadership

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given its emphasis on interpersonal interaction, collaboration, and consultation. Two datasets were collected: in the leader sample, 49 colleagues rated leaders and five leaders rated themselves; in the team sample, 45 colleagues rated team members and nine team members rated themselves.

### 4.3 Instrument Development and Content Validity

A multidimensional questionnaire was developed to operationalize the construct, grounded in Quiñones-González (2022) and in the literature for each dimension (Table 1). It contained five items per dimension (35 items, rated on a 5-point scale) in two versions: a self-assessment version and a colleague-assessment version with third-person phrasing. Before data collection, an expert panel reviewed the instrument for content validity, relevance, and conceptual alignment. Panel scores were aggregated, and feedback was incorporated into item refinement.

### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

The study complied with the requirements of the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus Institutional Review Board (approval #2025030065, March 28, 2025). Participants received informed consent documentation explaining the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality protections, absence of identifying information, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

### 4.5 Data Collection Procedures

Participants completed structured online questionnaires through Typeform® after providing informed consent. Each file contained two worksheets, one for the self-assessment and one for the colleague assessment, differing in item phrasing (first vs. third person). Data were managed securely and prepared for analysis in accordance with ethical research standards.

### 4.6 Data Analysis

Although the hypotheses were derived from a higher-order framework, the sample sizes precluded confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. As explained in Section 3.4, H1–H6 and H9 were therefore operationalized as contributions to the prediction of Referent Power, which served as the criterion variable because of its theoretical centrality, reliability, and component coherence.

Blank responses (counts in the Table 4 note) were replaced with the item mode. Analyses included Cronbach's alpha, exploratory principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation, Pearson correlations, sequential (Type I) ANOVA, multiple regression, and Mann–Whitney U tests, with a significance level of $\alpha = .05$. Mann–Whitney U tests were run in RStudio 2024.04.2 (Build 764) and all other analyses in IBM SPSS Statistics, version 25. Findings were interpreted as preliminary exploratory evidence rather than definitive validation.

In the sequential (Type I) ANOVA, the dimensions were entered in the order in which they are presented in the conceptual model (Table 1): intrinsic motivation, authenticity, emotional

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intelligence, empowerment, integrity and trustworthiness, and intuition. This order moves from intrapersonal foundations to interpersonally enacted dimensions and places intuition, the least established dimension in leadership measurement, last. Because Type I sums of squares depend on entry order, each sequential test reflects the variance a dimension adds beyond the dimensions entered before it, not its unique variance. Independent contributions were therefore assessed with the partial coefficients of the full model, which do not depend on entry order.

## 5. Results

The results are presented in six stages: instrument and psychometric quality, component structure, relationships with Referent Power, comparison between self- and colleague ratings, integrated hypothesis decisions, and an empirically refined model (Figure 1), whereas the analyses treat. Referent Power, the most reliable and structurally coherent dimension, as the criterion variable for the other six. The final stage (Section 5.8) uses these results to propose a post-hoc refined model (Figure 2).

### 5.1 Instrument Development and Data Structure

The instrument consisted of parallel self- and external-assessment versions covering the seven proposed dimensions (Table 3). Colleagues rated leaders (n = 49) and team members (n = 45), and leaders (n = 5) and team members (n = 9) rated themselves.

**Table 3. Overview of Data Collection Instruments and Assessment Design**

| File | Worksheet | Type of Evaluation | Evaluator | Person Evaluated | Evidence in the Items |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leader dataset | Colleagues Assessment | External assessment | Colleagues | Leaders | Items written in third person: "This person is driven by…," "This person openly admits…," "I admire this person…" |
| Same leader assessment file | Leader Self-Assessment | Self-assessment | The leader | Self | Items written in first person: "I am driven by…," "I trust my instincts…," "I seek to understand who I am…" |
| Team-member datasset | Team by Colleagues | External assessment | Colleagues | Team members | Items written in third person: "This person is driven by…," "This |

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| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | person consistently acts…," "I admire this person…" |
| Same team assessment | Team Self-Assessment | Self-assessment file | Team member | Self | Items written in first person: "I am driven by…," "I find fulfillment…," "I trust my instincts…" |

*Note.* Responses were scored on a 5-point scale. Colleague ratings: Leaders, n = 49 raters; Team members, n = 45 raters. Self-assessments: Leaders, n = 5; Team members, n = 9. The data files did not include an identifier linking each colleague rating to a specific leader or team member.

### 5.2 Internal Consistency and Scale Refinement

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each dimension before the component and regression analyses (Table 4) and interpreted using standard criteria (< .60 = low; .60–.69 = questionable; .70–.79 = acceptable; .80–.89 = good; ≥ .90 = excellent). Referent Power showed the highest internal consistency in both samples (Leaders α = .92; Team members α = .92). One item was removed from the Emotional Intelligence scale in the Leaders sample (item–total r = .28; α = .69 to .70) and one from the Intrinsic Motivation scale in the Team sample (item–total r = .027; α = .57 to .71). With these refinements, the dimension scores reached acceptable reliability for exploratory research, except Empowerment in the Leaders sample (α = .65), which should be interpreted cautiously. The need for item removal suggests that some scales warrant further refinement and confirmation in larger samples.

**Table 4. Internal Consistency and Scale Refinement of the Subtle Leadership Dimensions**

| **Dimension** | **Cronbach's α** | **Number of Items** | **Interpretation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Leaders: Internal Consistency (n = 49)*** | | | |
| Intrinsic Motivation | .74 | 5 | Acceptable |
| Authenticity | .71 | 5 | Acceptable |
| Emotional Intelligence, initial scale | .69 | 5 | Quiestionable |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emotional Intelligence, corrected scale | .70 | 4 | Acceptable; one item removed due to item-total correlation < .30 [a] |
| Empowerment | .65 | 5 | Questionable |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | .77 | 5 | Acceptable to good |
| Intuition | .71 | 5 | Acceptable |
| Referent Power | .92 | 5 | Excellent |

***Team Members: Internal Consistency (n = 45)***

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic Motivation, initial scale | .57 | 5 | Low |
| Intrinsic Motivation, corrected scale | .71 | 4 | Acceptable; one item removed due to item-total correlation < .30 [b] |
| Authenticity | .84 | 5 | Good |
| Emotional Intelligence | .87 | 5 | Good to high |
| Empowerment | .83 | 5 | Good |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | .83 | 5 | Good |
| Intuition | .70 | 5 | Acceptable |
| Referent Power | .92 | 5 | Excellent |

***Scale Refinement Following Item Removal***

| **Group / Dimension** | **α: Initial → Corrected** | **Item–total r** | **Item removed and reason** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leaders: Emotional Intelligence | .69 → .70 | .28 | Item 4: This person is aware of their own triggers and mind traps and can self-correct them. Item-total correlation fell |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | below .30; removal produced a modest improvement in internal consistency. |
| Team: Motivation | Intrinsic.57 → .71 | .03 | Item 2: This person doesn't need positive feedback to know they've done something well. Near-zero item-total correlation; removal produced a substantial improvement in internal consistency. |

*Note.* Reliability coefficients are interpreted in the context of exploratory research. Unanswered items (Leaders: 13 responses from 9 raters; Team members: 17 responses from 12 raters and 1 self-assessment response) were replaced with the modal response of the corresponding item. Corrected scales were used to compute dimension scores in all subsequent analyses. Intuition was retained in all analyses (see Tables 8 and 9). [a] Removed item 4 (Leaders, Emotional Intelligence) [b] Removed item 2 (Team, Intrinsic Motivation)

### 5.3 Exploratory Examination of the Proposed Structure

Principal component analyses with varimax rotation were conducted separately for each sample to evaluate whether the observed structure aligned with the proposed multidimensional model (Tables 5 and 6). At the item level (34 items after item removal), sampling adequacy was poor in the Leaders sample (KMO = .55) and mediocre in the Team sample (KMO = .69), although Bartlett's tests were significant (Leaders $\chi^2(56) = 1216.83$; Team members $\chi^2(561) = 1291.24$; both $p < .001$). Both solutions were fragmented (Leaders: 9 components, 75.8% of the variance; Team members: 8 components, 76.5%), which is expected given the small number of cases relative to items. Referent Power was the only dimension with a coherent structure: all five items loaded on one component in the Leaders sample (.68–.82), and four of five did so in the Team sample (.70–.82). The remaining dimensions were dispersed across components with cross-loadings, apart from partial groupings such as Empowerment items 4 and 5 in both samples.

At the dimension level, the data were well suited to factoring (Leaders KMO = .84, $\chi^2(21) = 134.60$; Team members KMO = .88, $\chi^2(21) = 212.25$; both $p < .001$). A single dominant component emerged in each sample (Leaders eigenvalue = 3.84, 54.8% of the variance; Team members eigenvalue = 4.70, 67.2%), with all seven dimensions loading positively (Leaders .63–.87; Team members .67–.92) and Referent Power loading highest (.87 and .92). These findings support the use of composite dimension scores but do not confirm a clean second-order structure, so Subtle Leadership is treated here as an exploratory multidimensional framework.

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**Table 5. Leaders: Exploratory Principal Component Analysis of the Subtle Leadership Instrument**

***Factorability statistics***

| Test | Result | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| *Item level (34 items; Emotional Intelligence item 4 removed)* | | |
| Kaiser—Meyer—Olkin (KMO) | .553 | Poor (< .60); item-level sample adequacy is limited |
| Bartlett's test of sphericity — approximate $\chi^2$ | 1216.829 | Evidence of sufficient correlations among items |
| Bartlett's test — df | 561 | Degrees of freedom |
| Bartlett's test — p | < .001 | Identity matrix rejected; component analysis justified |
| *Dimension level (seven dimension scores)* | | |
| Kaiser—Meyer—Olkin (KMO) | .841 | Good sampling adequacy |
| Bartlett's test of sphericity — approximate $\chi^2$ | 134.597 | Significant correlations among the dimension scores |
| Bartlett's test — df | 21 | Degrees of freedom |
| Bartlett's test — p | < .001 | Identity matrix rejected |
| *Extraction and rotation* | | |
| Item-level solution | Principal component analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue > 1): 9 components, 75.8% of the variance. | |
| Dimension-level solution | One dominant component (eigenvalue = 3.84; 54.8% of the variance); loadings ranged from .633 to .866; the second eigenvalue was 0.79 (< 1). Referent Power showed the highest loading (.866). | |

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*Summary of the Rotated Component Solution (Item Level)*

| Theoretical Dimension | Items | Observed Pattern in Rotated Matrix | Interpretation for Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic Motivation | IM1–IM5 | Distributed across C1, C2, C3, C5, and C6 (IM1 on C3 = .53; IM2 on C5 = .61; IM3 on C6 = .57; IM4 on C5 = .48; IM5 on C2 = .54). | Did not load on a single component; exploratory rather than confirmatory evidence. |
| Authenticity | AU1–AU5 | AU1–AU2 on C6 (.68, .57); AU3 on C1 (.60); AU4 on C3 (.63); AU5 on C8 (.57) with a cross-loading on C1 (.44). | Dispersed across four components; no clean component structure. |
| Emotional Intelligence | EI1–EI3, EI5 | EI1–EI3 on C2 (.66–.79); EI5 on C6 (.72). | Partial grouping; no fully defined component structure. |
| Empowerment | EM1–EM5 | EM4–EM5 on C4 (.91, .90); EM1 and EM3 on C2 (.47, .53); EM2 on C9 (.83), with a cross-loading of EM3 on C9 (.45). | Partial structure; two items clearly grouped; treated as an exploratory composite. |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | IT1–IT5 | IT2 and IT5 on C3 (.75, .62); IT1, IT3, and IT4 on C5 (.53–.59), with cross-loadings on C1 and C7. | Two partial clusters; retained for theoretical relevance. |
| Intuition | INT1–INT5 | INT1 on C7 (.85); INT2 on C2 (.76); INT4 on C8 (.83); INT3 split across C3, C7, and C8 (.40–.50); INT5 on C7 (.45). | Dispersion; caution in interpreting as an independent latent dimension. |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Referent Power | RP1–RP5 | All five items on (.68–.82). | C1 Most coherent component structure; selected as criterion variable for exploratory regression. |

*Note.* Components are labeled C1–C9 in order of rotated variance; loadings ≥ .40 are reported. The item-level analyses are exploratory and are limited by the small number of cases relative to items (49 cases for 34 items). Dimension-level analyses use the seven dimension scores (Emotional Intelligence based on four items).

**Table 6. Team Members: Exploratory Principal Component Analysis of the Subtle Leadership Instrument**

***Sampling Adequacy statistics***

| Test | Result | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| *Item level (34 items; Intrinsic Motivation item 2 removed)* | | |
| Kaiser—Meyer—Olkin (KMO) | .690 | Mediocre to acceptable sampling adequacy |
| Bartlett's test of sphericity — approximate $\chi^2$ | 1291.241 | Evidence of sufficient correlations among items |
| Bartlett's test — df | 561 | Degrees of freedom |
| Bartlett's test — p | < .001 | Identity matrix rejected; component analysis justified |
| *Dimension level (seven dimension scores)* | | |
| Kaiser—Meyer—Olkin (KMO) | .886 | Meritorious sampling adequacy |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Bartlett's test of sphericity — approximate $\chi^2$ | 212.246 | Significant correlations among the dimension scores |
| Bartlett's test — df | 21 | Degrees of freedom |
| Bartlett's test — p | < .001 | Identity matrix rejected |

*Extraction and rotation*

| | |
|---|---|
| Item-level solution | Principal component analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue > 1): 8 components, 76.5% of the variance. |
| Dimension-level solution | One dominant component (eigenvalue = 4.70; 67.2% of the variance); loadings ranged from .667 to .915; the second eigenvalue was 0.82 (< 1). Referent Power showed the highest loading (.915). |

*Summary of the Rotated Component Solution (Item Level)*

| Theoretical Dimension | Items | Observed Pattern in Rotated Matrix | Interpretation for Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic Motivation | IM1, IM3–IM5 | IM1 isolated on C7 (.91); IM5 on C4 (.46–.80), with cross-loadings on C1 and C3. | IM3–Partially coherent; not unidimensional. |
| Authenticity | AU1–AU5 | Spread across C1, C3, C5, and C7 with cross-loadings (AU3–AU4 on C5, .48–.66; AU1 and AU5 on C1, .49–.52). | Component overlap; no clean component structure. |
| Emotional Intelligence | EI1–EI5 | EI1–EI2 on C1 (.68, .54) with cross-loadings on C3; EI4–EI5 on C3 (.79, .80); EI3 on C4 (.70). | Partial grouping; cautious interpretation. |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Empowerment | EM1–EM5 | EM4–EM5 on C2 (.84, .79);Partial structure; retained EM1–EM3 on C1 (.45–.54) withas exploratory composite. cross-loadings on C3 and C5. |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | IT1–IT5 | Spread across C1, C2, C4, C7,No clear unidimensional and C8: IT1, IT2, and IT5 on C2structure; retained for (.44–.52); IT3 on C1 (.64); IT4theoretical relevance. on C4 (.46); IT4–IT5 negative loadings on C8. |
| Intuition | INT1–I5 | INT3–INT4 on C6 (.81, .86);Partial grouping with INT1 shared by C5 and C6 (.53,dispersion; caution .51); INT2 shared by C1 and C4warranted. (.57, .58); INT5 on C8 (.65). |
| Referent Power | RP1–RP5 | RP2–RP5 on C1 (.70–.82); RP1Most coherent dimension; on C7 (.55) with a secondarysupports use as loading on C1 (.43). reference/criterion. |

*Note.* Components are labeled C1–C8 in order of rotated variance; loadings ≥ .40 are reported. The item-level analyses are exploratory and are limited by the small number of cases relative to items (45 cases for 34 items). Dimension-level analyses use the seven dimension scores (Intrinsic Motivation based on four items).

### 5.4 Relationships Between the Dimensions and Referent Power

Pearson correlations (Table 7), sequential (Type I) ANOVA (the sequential contribution of each dimension beyond those entered before it, H1–H6), and multiple regression (the independent contribution of each dimension and the collective contribution of all six, H9) were conducted separately for each sample. All six dimensions correlated positively with Referent Power (Leaders r = .45–.68; Team members r = .56–.80; all p ≤ .001). Intuition correlated moderately with Referent Power in both samples (r = .58 and r = .58), well below any level suggesting redundancy, and was retained in all models.

**Table 7. Correlations Between the Proposed Subtle Leadership Dimensions and Referent Power**

| **Dimension** | **Leaders (n = 49)** | | **Team Members (n = 45)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pearson's r** | **p** | **Pearson's r** | **p** |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic Motivation | .56 | < .001 | .56 | < .001 |
| Authenticity | .68 | < .001 | .80 | < .001 |
| Emotional Intelligence | .45 | .001 | .69 | < .001 |
| Empowerment | .49 | < .001 | .80 | < .001 |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | .65 | < .001 | .77 | < .001 |
| Intuition | .58 | < .001 | .58 | < .001 |

*Note.* Correlations were computed between each dimension score and the Referent Power score within each sample. Correlations ranged from .45 to .68 in the Leaders sample and from .56 to .80 in the Team sample, all $p \leq .001$. Intuition was moderately to strongly correlated with Referent Power in both samples ($r = .58$ and $r = .58$), well below the threshold for redundancy, and was therefore retained in all regression models.

### 5.5 Multivariate Prediction of Referent Power

#### *5.5.1 Leaders*

The six-predictor model was significant, $F(6, 42) = 12.59$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .643$ (Table 8). In the sequential ANOVA, Intrinsic Motivation ($p < .001$), Authenticity ($p < .001$), Empowerment ($p = .022$), and Integrity and Trustworthiness ($p = .049$) made significant sequential contributions, whereas Emotional Intelligence ($p = .425$) and Intuition ($p = .118$) did not. Because Intrinsic Motivation was entered first, its sequential contribution includes variance it shares with the dimensions entered after it. In the full model, only Authenticity was a significant partial predictor ($B = 0.45$, $p = .018$; all VIF $\leq 2.06$). A final model retaining the four contributing dimensions explained 62.0% of the variance ($R^2 = .62$, adjusted $R^2 = .59$), $F(4, 44) = 17.95$, $p < .001$. Authenticity remained the strongest predictor ($B = 0.57$, $p = .001$), Integrity & Trustworthiness and Intrinsic Motivation showed marginal associations ($p = .053$ and $p = .080$), and Empowerment was not significant once the others were controlled ($p = .181$). Because this reduced model retained the dimensions that were significant in the order-dependent sequential analysis, it should be read as one exploratory specification rather than an optimal model.

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**Table 8. Leaders: Sequential and Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Referent Power**

***Overall Model (Six Predictors)***

| Source | df | SS | MS | F | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 6 | 16.613 | 2.769 | 12.59 | < .001 |
| Residual | 42 | 9.237 | 0.220 | — | — |
| Total | 48 | 25.850 | — | — | — |

*Sequential Contributions of Each Dimension*

| Hypothesis | Dimension | df | SS | MS | F | p | Sequential Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | Intrinsic Motivation | 1 | 8.199 | 8.199 | 37.28 | < .001 | Significant |
| H2 | Authenticity | 1 | 5.566 | 5.566 | 25.31 | < .001 | Significant |
| H3 | Emotional Intelligence | 1 | 0.143 | 0.143 | 0.65 | .425 | Not significant |
| H4 | Empowerment | 1 | 1.242 | 1.242 | 5.65 | .022 | Significant |
| H5 | Integrity and Trustworthiness | 1 | 0.904 | 0.904 | 4.11 | .049 | Significant at the .05 level |
| H6 | Intuition | 1 | 0.559 | 0.559 | 2.54 | .118 | Not significant |
| H7 | Referent Power | — | — | — | — | — | Criterion/criterion variable |

*Coefficients of the Full Model (Six Predictors)*

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | p | VIF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | −2.36 | 0.82 | — | −2.87 | .006 | — |
| Intrinsic Motivation | 0.25 | 0.16 | .195 | 1.60 | .117 | 1.74 |

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| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Authenticity | 0.45 | 0.18 | .306 | 2.45 | .018 | 1.83 |
| Emotional Intelligence | 0.02 | 0.14 | .017 | 0.15 | .885 | 1.57 |
| Empowerment | 0.24 | 0.19 | .143 | 1.25 | .219 | 1.54 |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | 0.28 | 0.17 | .219 | 1.66 | .105 | 2.06 |
| Intuition | 0.25 | 0.16 | .185 | 1.59 | .118 | 1.58 |

*Model Summary (Full Model)*

| | |
|---|---|
| Criterion variable | Referent Power |
| $R$ / $R^2$ / Adjusted $R^2$ | .80 / .64 / .59 |
| Standard error of the estimate | 0.47 |

*Reduced Four-Predictor Model*

| | |
|---|---|
| Final predictors | Intrinsic Motivation, Authenticity, Empowerment, Integrity and Trustworthiness |
| $R^2$ / Adjusted $R^2$ | .62 / .59 |
| F-statistic | $F(4, 44) = 17.95$, $p < .001$ |
| Residual standard error | 0.47 |

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | p | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | −2.05 | 0.80 | — | −2.56 | .014 | Significant |
| Intrinsic Motivation | 0.26 | 0.15 | .203 | 1.80 | .080 | Marginal positive association |
| Authenticity | 0.57 | 0.17 | .389 | 3.41 | .001 | Strongest significant predictor |

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| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empowerment | 0.26 | 0.19 | .152 | 1.36 | .181 | Not significant |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | 0.34 | 0.17 | .259 | 1.99 | .053 | Marginal association |

*Note*. n = 49 colleague ratings. Dimension scores are item means (Emotional Intelligence based on four items). Dimensions were entered sequentially in the order shown; F tests use the residual mean square of the full model. The final adjusted model retained the dimensions that contributed in the sequential analysis (Emotional Intelligence and Intuition were removed). VIF = variance inflation factor. Sequential (Type I) tests are order-dependent (see Section 4.6); independent contributions are given by the full-model coefficients." In Table 12, H1, Leader column: "Significant sequential contribution (entered first; $p < .001$); marginal in the final model ($p = .080$).

*5.5.2 Team Members*

The six-predictor model was significant, $F(6, 38) = 23.23$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .79$, adjusted $R^2 = .75$ (Table 9; all VIF ≤ 3.27). Authenticity ($B = 0.35$, $p = .048$) and Empowerment ($B = 0.39$, $p = .036$) were significant independent predictors, and Integrity and Trustworthiness was marginal ($p = .077$). Intrinsic Motivation ($p = .991$), Emotional Intelligence ($p = .208$), and Intuition ($p = .393$) were not significant once the other dimensions were controlled, although Intrinsic Motivation ($p < .001$) and Emotional Intelligence ($p = .041$) contributed in the sequential ANOVA, suggesting that they share variance with stronger relational predictors. Across samples, Authenticity was the only dimension that contributed independently in both, and Empowerment did so in the Team sample. Sequential (Type I) tests are order-dependent (see Section 4.6); independent contributions are given by the full-model coefficients." In Table 12, H1, Leader column: "Significant sequential contribution (entered first; $p < .001$); marginal in the final model ($p = .080$)

**Table 9. Team Members: Sequential and Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Referent Power**

***Overall Model (Six Predictors)***

| Source | df | SS | MS | F | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Regression | 6 | 24.427 | 4.071 | 23.23 | < .001 |
| Residual | 38 | 6.661 | 0.175 | — | — |
| Total | 44 | 31.088 | — | — | — |

*Sequential Contributions of Each Dimension*

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| Hypothesis | Dimension | df | SS | MS | F | p | Exploratory Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | Intrinsic Motivation | 1 | 9.786 | 9.786 | 55.83 | < .001 | Significant |
| H2 | Authenticity | 1 | 10.255 | 10.255 | 58.51 | < .001 | Significant |
| H3 | Emotional Intelligence | 1 | 0.787 | 0.787 | 4.49 | .041 | Significant at the .05 level |
| H4 | Empowerment | 1 | 2.962 | 2.962 | 16.90 | < .001 | Significant |
| H5 | Integrity and Trustworthiness | 1 | 0.506 | 0.506 | 2.89 | .097 | Marginal; not significant at .05 |
| H6 | Intuition | 1 | 0.131 | 0.131 | 0.75 | .393 | Not significant |
| H7 | Referent Power | — | — | — | — | — | Criterion/criterion variable |

*Coefficients of the Full Model (Six Predictors)*

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | p | VIF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | −1.75 | 0.57 | — | −3.10 | .004 | — |
| Intrinsic Motivation | 0.00 | 0.17 | .001 | 0.01 | .991 | 2.10 |
| Authenticity | 0.35 | 0.17 | .270 | 2.05 | .048 | 3.09 |
| Emotional Intelligence | 0.18 | 0.14 | .156 | 1.28 | .208 | 2.63 |
| Empowerment | 0.39 | 0.18 | .295 | 2.17 | .036 | 3.27 |
| Integrity and Trustworthiness | 0.30 | 0.17 | .234 | 1.82 | .077 | 2.93 |
| Intuition | 0.12 | 0.14 | .085 | 0.86 | .393 | 1.72 |

*Model Summary (Full Model)*

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| Criterion variable | Referent Power |
|---|---|
| R / $R^2$ / Adjusted $R^2$ | .89 / .79 / .75 |
| Standard error of the estimate | 0.42 |

*Note.* n = 45 colleague ratings. Dimension scores are item means (Intrinsic Motivation based on four items). Dimensions were entered sequentially in the order shown; F tests use the residual mean square of the full model. Intuition was included in the model; its correlation with Referent Power was r = .58 (Table 7), and all VIF values were below 3.5, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. Sequential (Type I) tests are order-dependent (see Section 4.6); independent contributions are given by the full-model coefficients." In Table 12, H1, Leader column: "Significant sequential contribution (entered first; $p < .001$); marginal in the final model ($p = .080$).

### 5.6 Comparison of Self-Ratings and Colleague Ratings (H8)

A composite score (the mean of the seven dimension scores) was compared between self- and colleague ratings using Mann–Whitney U tests (Tables 10 and 11). In the Leaders sample, self-assessments (M = 4.05, Mdn = 4.05, n = 5) and colleague ratings (M = 4.09, Mdn = 4.07, n = 49) were nearly identical, U = 119.00, Z = −0.10, p = .917. In the Team sample, self-assessments were somewhat higher (M = 4.09, n = 9) than colleague ratings (M = 3.83, n = 45), but the difference was not significant, U = 137.50, Z = −1.51, p = .131. Because the data did not identify the leader or team member rated, these are comparisons between independent groups, not paired agreement, and the self-assessment groups are very small.

**Table 10. Leaders: Comparison of Self- and External Assessments of the Subtle Leadership Dimensions**

***Descriptive Statistics by Assessment Group***

| Group | n | M | Mdn | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leader Assessment | Self-5 | 4.05 | 4.05 | 0.567 | 3.16 | 4.69 |
| Colleagues Assessment | 49 | 4.09 | 4.07 | 0.422 | 2.98 | 4.83 |

*Mann–Whitney/Wilcoxon Ranks*

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| Group | n | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leader Assessment | Self-5 | 28.20 | 141.00 |
| Colleagues Assessment | 49 | 27.43 | 1,344.00 |

*Mann–Whitney/Wilcoxon Test Results*

| Statistic | Value |
|---|---|
| Mann–Whitney U | 119.00 |
| Wilcoxon W | 141.00 |
| Z | −0.10 |
| Asymptotic significance (2-tailed) | p = .917 |

*Note.* Scores are the mean of the seven dimension scores. The non-significant result indicates the absence of a detectable difference between groups, not demonstrated equivalence; the self-assessment group is very small (n = 5), and self- and colleague-ratings cannot be paired because the data do not identify the leader rated.

**Table 11. Team Members: Comparison of Self- and External Assessments of the Subtle Leadership Dimensions**

***Descriptive Statistics by Assessment Group***

| **Group** | **n** | **M** | **Mdn** | **SD** | **Minimum** | **Maximum** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Team Self-Assessment | 9 | 4.09 | 4.18 | 0.220 | 3.63 | 4.32 |
| Team by Colleagues | 45 | 3.83 | 3.91 | 0.541 | 2.33 | 4.86 |

*Mann–Whitney/Wilcoxon Ranks*

| Group | n | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Team Self-Assessment | 9 | 34.72 | 312.50 |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Team by Colleagues | 45 | 26.06 | 1,172.50 |

*Mann–Whitney/Wilcoxon Test Results*

| Statistic | Value |
|---|---|
| Mann–Whitney U | 137.50 |
| Wilcoxon W | 312.50 |
| Z | −1.51 |
| Asymptotic significance (2-tailed) | p = .13 |

*Note.* Scores are the mean of the seven dimension scores. The non-significant result indicates the absence of a detectable difference between groups, not demonstrated equivalence; the self-assessment group is small (n = 9), and self- and colleague-ratings cannot be paired because the data do not identify the person rated.

### 5.7 Integrated Hypothesis Decisions

Table 12 integrates the evidence for each hypothesis. The findings partially support the exploratory examination of Subtle Leadership as a multidimensional relational construct but do not support second-order confirmation. Referent Power showed the highest reliability and clearest component coherence in both samples. Authenticity was the most consistent contributor; Empowerment contributed mainly in the Team sample; Integrity and Trustworthiness and Intrinsic Motivation contributed partially, depending on the model; and Emotional Intelligence and Intuition did not contribute independently, although Intuition correlated moderately with Referent Power. H9 was supported in both samples. For H8, no significant difference between self-ratings and colleague ratings was detected in either sample; given the very small self-rating groups and unpaired data, this result is inconclusive rather than supportive.

**Table 12. Integrated Evidence and Hypothesis Decisions Across the Proposed Subtle Leadership Dimensions**

| Hypothesis | Leaders – main evidence | Team – main evidence | Integrated conclusion |
|---|---|---|---|
| H1: Intrinsic Motivation | Supported in the sequential ANOVA ($p < .001$); marginal in the | Contributed in the sequential ANOVA ($p < .001$); no independent | Mixed evidence; contributes in sequential models but does not maintain an |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | final model coefficient (p = .080). | partial effect in the full model (p = .991). | independent partial effect. |
| H2: Authenticity | Supported: sequential ANOVA (p < .001); final model coefficient (p = .001). | Supported: sequential ANOVA (p < .001); partial coefficient in the full model (p = .048). | Consistent support in both samples; the most consistent dimension associated with Referent Power. |
| H3: Emotional Intelligence | Not supported: sequential ANOVA (p = .425); removed from the final model. | Sequential ANOVA p = .041; not significant as a partial coefficient (p = .208). | Weak and inconsistent support; interpret with caution. |
| H4: Empowerment | Supported in the sequential ANOVA (p = .022); not significant in the final model coefficient (p = .181). | Supported: partial coefficient in the full model (p = .036); sequential ANOVA (p < .001). | Moderate support, stronger in the team than in the leaders sample. |
| H5: Integrity and Trustworthiness | Supported in the sequential ANOVA (p = .049); marginal in the final model coefficient (p = .053). | Marginal: sequential ANOVA (p = .097); partial coefficient in the full model (p = .077). | Partial support; relevant, though not robust at the .05 level across models. |
| H6: Intuition | Not supported as an independent predictor (p = .118); removed from the final model. Correlation with Referent Power: r = .58. | Not supported as an independent predictor (p = .393). Correlation with Referent Power: r = .58. | Does not hold as an independent predictor in either sample, although it correlates moderately with Referent Power; its association overlaps with that of other dimensions. |

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| H7: Referent Power | Used as criterion variable; α = .92. | Used as criterion/criterion variable; α = .92. | Most coherent dimension to serve as the core mechanism of influence of Subtle Leadership. |
| H8: Self-Colleague Comparison | No significant difference: U = 119.00, W = 141.00, Z = −0.10, p = .917. | No significant difference: U = 137.50, W = 312.50, Z = −1.51, p = .131. | No significant difference detected in either sample; inconclusive given low power (n = 5 and n = 9) and unpaired ratings. |
| H9: Global Contribution | Supported: full model F(6, 42) = 12.59, p < .001, $R^2$ = .64; final model F(4, 44) = 17.95, p < .001, $R^2$ = .62. | Supported: full model F(6, 38) = 23.23, p < .001, $R^2$ = .79, adjusted $R^2$ = .75. | Strong global support; the dimensions significantly explain Referent Power, although not all contribute independently. |

*Note.* H7 was not tested as a predictor because Referent Power served as the criterion variable. Intuition (H6) was included in the full regression model in both samples. The H8 decision reflects the absence of a detected difference, not evidence of agreement or equivalence.

### 5.8 Post-Hoc Exploratory Refined Model of Subtle Leadership

Because the analyses showed partial overlap among the proposed dimensions, a refined model was developed post hoc from the same data (Figure 2). It does not replace the a priori model (Figure 1); it is an exploratory reorganization that generates hypotheses for future research and requires confirmation in an independent sample.

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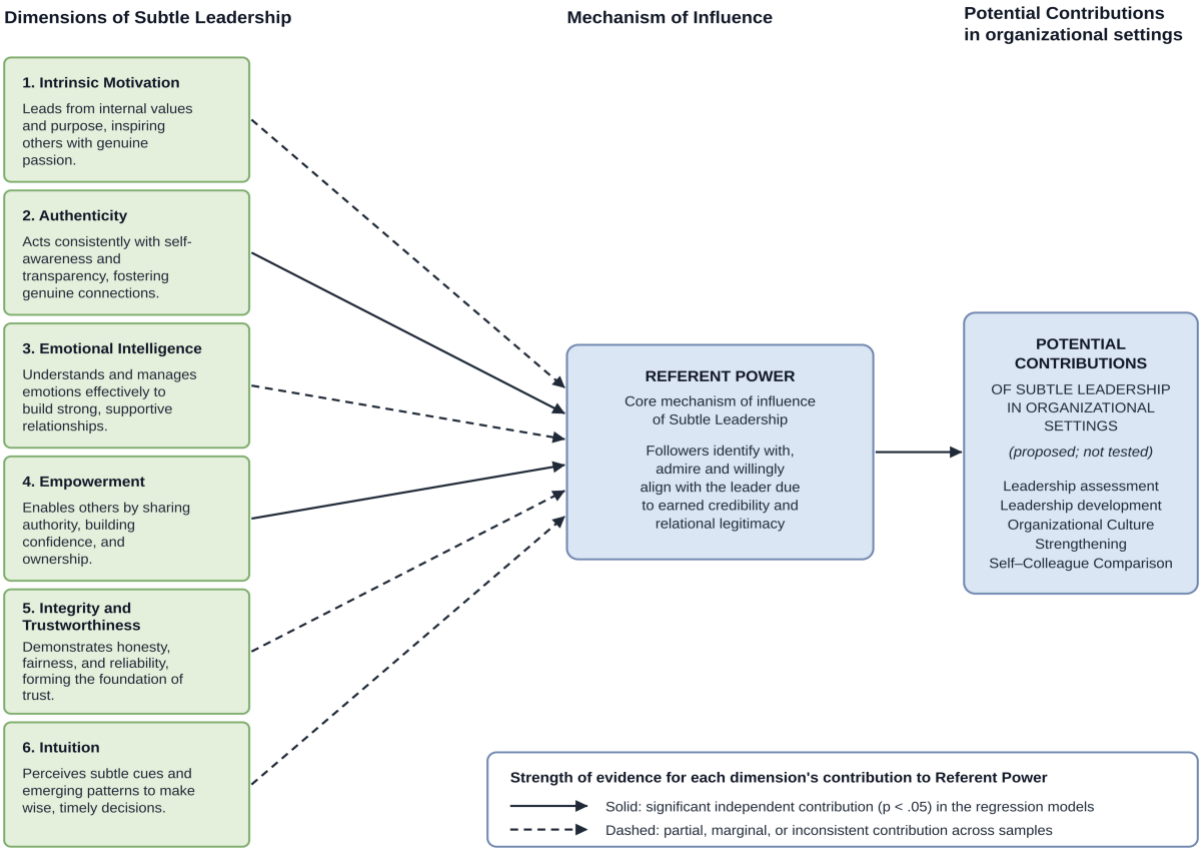
**Figure 2. Post-Hoc Exploratory Refined Model of Subtle Leadership**




Rather than replacing the original framework (Figure 1), the post hoc model is a preliminary reorganization intended to improve conceptual clarity for future research. Subtle Leadership is represented as a multidimensional construct whose dimensions are associated with Referent Power, the core mechanism through which leadership behaviors are socially interpreted and legitimized as influence. Solid arrows mark dimensions with a significant independent contribution in at least one sample (Authenticity and Empowerment); dashed arrows mark dimensions with partial, marginal, or inconsistent contributions (Intrinsic Motivation, Emotional Intelligence, Integrity & Trustworthiness, and Intuition). These interpretations are exploratory and require confirmatory research.

## 6. Discussion

The results partially support the proposed conceptualization of Subtle Leadership as centered on referent-based influence. Referent Power was the most reliable and factorially coherent dimension, and the six proposed dimensions jointly explained a substantial share of its variance, although only

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some contributed independently. Because the analyses are exploratory and the samples small, they do not confirm a higher-order latent structure. They do, however, offer an initial step toward developing Subtle Leadership in organizations marked by complexity, hybrid structures, workforce diversity, technological acceleration, and rising expectations for ethical conduct and psychological safety.

### 6.1 Measurement Adequacy and Instrument Performance

Most dimensions reached acceptable internal consistency for exploratory purposes after one item was removed from the Emotional Intelligence scale (Leaders) and one from the Intrinsic Motivation scale (Team members), which improved reliability without weakening theoretical coherence. At the item level, the rotated solutions showed overlap and cross-loadings, and sampling adequacy was poor in the Leaders sample (KMO = .553), partly because of the small number of cases. At the dimension level, however, a single dominant component emerged in both samples, with Referent Power loading highest.

### 6.2 Referent Power as the Core mechanism of influence of Subtle Leadership

Referent Power was the most empirically coherent dimension across analyses, supporting the central proposition of Subtle Leadership: in contemporary organizations, influence rests on admiration, interpersonal credibility, trust, and identification rather than solely on formal authority. Treating it as the core mechanism of influence, rather than as a secondary outcome of effective leadership, merits theoretical consideration. Because Referent Power and the predictors were measured with the same ratings, however, the associations reported describe shared perceptions, not causal influence.

### 6.3 Findings by Dimension

**Intrinsic Motivation (H1).** This dimension contributed in the sequential models in both samples (both $p < .001$), but its unique contribution diminished when the other dimensions were controlled (Leaders $p = .080$; Team members $p = .991$). One interpretation, to be tested, is that it acts as a foundation for the other dimensions rather than as an independent predictor of referent power.

**Authenticity (H2).** Authenticity was the most consistent finding across samples and analyses: it contributed significantly in both sequential analyses (both $p < .001$) and as an independent predictor in the Leaders ($p = .001$ in the final model) and Team ($p = .048$) samples. Within the framework, authenticity functions not only as an individual characteristic but as a relational mechanism through which leaders generate credibility, admiration, and interpersonal legitimacy.

**Emotional Intelligence (H3).** Emotional intelligence was not a consistent independent predictor. It did not contribute in the Leaders sequential analysis and was removed from the final model; in the Team sample its sequential contribution was significant, but its partial coefficient was not (Table 12). This pattern suggests that it shares predictive variance with authenticity and

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empowerment. It remains conceptually relevant given its established role in leadership effectiveness (Gómez-Leal *et al.*, 2022), and its structural role warrants confirmatory study.

**Empowerment (H4).** Empowerment was relevant mainly in the Team sample, where it was a significant independent predictor ($p = .036$) and correlated strongly with Referent Power ($r = .795$). In the Leaders sample it contributed sequentially ($p = .022$) but not in the final model ($p = .181$). These results suggest that subtle influence may emerge through developmental and enabling behaviors rather than directive control, potentially helping leaders cultivate trust, engagement, and voluntary follower commitment.

**Integrity and Trustworthiness (H5).** Integrity and trustworthiness showed partial support: it contributed sequentially in the Leaders sample but was only marginal in the final model and in the Team sample (Table 12). Although not robust across all models, its positive associations are consistent with scholarship identifying moral credibility as foundational to sustainable influence and relational trust.

**Intuition (H6).** Intuition correlated moderately with Referent Power in both samples ($r = .58$) but did not contribute independently (Table 12), and its items were dispersed in the component solutions. Its association may therefore overlap with that of other relational dimensions, or the present items may not capture it as a distinct dimension.

**Referent Power (H7).** As the criterion variable, Referent Power was examined descriptively (Section 3.4); its role is discussed in Section 6.2.

### 6.4 Global Model Support (H9)

Both samples supported H9 (Leader sample $R^2 = .62$; Team-member sample adjusted $R^2 = .75$; full statistics in Section 5.5). As a set, the dimensions explain a substantial share of the variance in Referent Power, although not every dimension contributes independently.

### 6.5 Comparison Between Self- and Colleague Assessments (H8)

Self- and colleague composite scores did not differ significantly in the Leaders sample ($M = 4.05$ vs. 4.09; $p = .917$) or the Team sample ($M = 4.09$ vs. 3.83; $p = .131$). These results should not be read as perceptual alignment: a non-significant result is not evidence of equivalence, and the self-assessment groups were very small ($n = 5$ and $n = 9$) and unpaired. The somewhat higher self-ratings in the Team sample warrant monitoring in future studies with larger matched samples.

### 6.6 Broader Contextual Significance

Taken together, the results suggest that referent-based influence is associated with a cluster of dimensions that are both internally grounded and interpersonally enacted, in line with emerging

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scholarship on relational, ethical, and psychologically informed leadership. The dual-source design adds a second perspective on these dynamics, which future matched designs can examine at the individual level (Section 6.10).

### 6.7 Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to leadership scholarship in four ways. First, it advances a relational–referent leadership paradigm in which referent power is the core mechanism of leadership legitimacy rather than a secondary outcome (Section 6.2). Second, it integrates the seven dimensions into one framework and examines them as interrelated relational processes rather than independent constructs; although the findings support this integration only partially, they suggest a more systemic view of influence as emerging from interacting psychological, ethical, emotional, and relational dimensions. Third, by including intuition, it responds to calls to recognize tacit, experience-based judgment as part of leadership effectiveness; although its independent contribution was not supported here, its moderate association with Referent Power justifies further work on rapid contextual discernment. Fourth, it moves Subtle Leadership from a primarily conceptual proposition into the empirical domain through the development and preliminary testing of a multidimensional instrument, providing initial evidence on its internal structure and relational functioning and a basis for future refinement and validation.

### 6.8 Contribution to Practice

The following applications are potential uses that depend on further validation of the instrument, including confirmatory testing of its structure and evidence of predictive validity in larger samples. Until then, the instrument is suited to research and developmental feedback, not to selection, evaluation, or promotion decisions. For leadership assessment, the framework allows influence to be evaluated beyond performance-centered indicators, emphasizing relational dimensions such as authenticity, empowerment, integrity and trustworthiness, and referent power, and may help identify leaders with strong relational credibility. For leadership development, the dimensions may serve as pillars in coaching, mentoring, and organizational learning, encouraging authenticity, empowerment, and ethical consistency that build referent power through relational trustworthiness rather than dominance. At the organizational level, Subtle Leadership may contribute to cultures of psychological safety, collaboration, engagement, and trust. Finally, comparing self- and colleague assessments may help identify perceptual gaps affecting relational credibility: high congruence may indicate stronger self-awareness and relational consistency, whereas discrepancies may reveal developmental blind spots, although this diagnostic use requires validation in larger matched samples.

### 6.9 Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The samples were small, particularly the self-assessment groups (n = 5 and n = 9), and the number of cases was low relative to the number of

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items, which limited statistical power and generalizability. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Because confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were not conducted, neither the original seven-dimension structure nor the empirically refined model has been confirmatorily tested; both remain preliminary. The refined model was derived from the same exploratory sample used to test the original hypotheses and is therefore a post-hoc reorganization requiring independent replication. Several dimensions showed cross-loadings, and Intuition did not contribute independently. Because the dataset did not include identifiers linking ratings to the person rated, colleague ratings could not be modeled as nested within targets, and self–colleague differences were examined as independent-group comparisons. Finally, because the same colleagues rated both the dimensions and Referent Power, shared-source bias, social desirability, and perceptual bias may have inflated their associations.

### 6.10 Future Research

Future research should use larger, more diverse samples to strengthen external validity and should apply CFA and SEM to the refined model, with Referent Power as the core mechanism of influence and the six dimensions as its antecedents, in an independent sample. Data collection should link each rating to the person rated, allowing multilevel modeling and matched self–other comparisons. Longitudinal and multi-source designs could clarify how Subtle Leadership develops over time and reduce shared-source bias, while studies of discriminant validity against related leadership theories would clarify its distinctiveness. Potential mediators and moderators also warrant investigation, as does further psychometric refinement to reduce cross-loadings and to determine whether Intuition can be measured as a distinct dimension. Qualitative or mixed-methods work could further illuminate how Subtle Leadership is experienced in practice.

## 7. Conclusion

This study is an initial empirical effort to operationalize Subtle Leadership as a relational construct grounded in referent-based influence. Rather than confirming seven co-equal dimensions, the findings suggest a post-hoc refined model, to be tested in independent samples, in which Referent Power is the core mechanism of influence and the other six dimensions are associated with it to different degrees, most consistently Authenticity and, among team members, Empowerment. Its broader implication is that meaningful leadership may rest less on position than on authenticity, relational legitimacy, and the quiet credibility that leads others to follow voluntarily.

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## Declarations

The manuscript is original, unpublished, and not under consideration elsewhere, and I am its sole author. It builds on my earlier conceptual paper, which introduced Subtle Leadership without empirical data: Quiñones-González, L. E. (2022). Subtle leadership: When referent power is subtly powerful. The Journal of Values-Based Leadership, 15(2). The present paper is its first empirical examination and does not duplicate it. The study was approved by the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus Institutional Review Board (#2025030065, March 28, 2025), and all participants gave informed consent. I have no conflicts of interest and received no funding. The questionnaire (both versions), the IRB approval, and an anonymized dataset are available to the editors and reviewers on request.

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