



# Leading in an Entrepreneurial Context— Present and Future Perspectives

**Christian Harrison<sup>1</sup>**

*University of Bolton, Greater Manchester Business School, Bolton, UK*

**Kingsley Omeihe**

*University of the West of Scotland, UK*

**Abstract.** This article introduces the special issue on entrepreneurial leadership, comprising six papers. Through this special issue, our principal aim as guest editors is to promote the progress of this field by deepening our knowledge of leading in an entrepreneurial context. In doing so, we invited submissions that will enhance our present and future perspectives on leading in an entrepreneurial context. We welcomed ‘research for’ rather than ‘research about’ entrepreneurial leadership. We focused especially on empirical research on particular topics within the broad area of entrepreneurial leadership. Yet we also sought studies that promote the value of entrepreneurial leadership in education programmes. The resulting collection of six articles gives the readers wide exposure to different thoughts and brings together a multidisciplinary perspective on the intersection between entrepreneurship and leadership.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurial leadership; entrepreneurship education.

## 1. Introduction

There is a considerable body of research in the fields of entrepreneurship and leadership spanning several decades. Despite work across both domains, entrepreneurship and leadership remain ambiguous concepts. There exist considerable overlaps and parallels, both historically and conceptually (Cogliser and Brigham, 2004; Galloway *et al.*, 2015; Harrison *et al.*, 2023), with some researchers defining entrepreneurship as leadership within a narrow context (Vecchio, 2003). This research has led to the emergence of a new paradigm known as “Entrepreneurial leadership” (Ahmed and Harrison, 2022; Clark *et al.*, 2019; Cogliser and Brigham, 2004; Fernald *et al.*, 2005; Harrison *et al.*, 2016a; 2016b; 2018; Kuratko, 2007; Omeihe *et al.*, 2023; Roomi and Harrison, 2011).

Nowadays, businesses exist in environments that are both complex and turbulent. Entrepreneurial leadership has been proposed as a concept that entrepreneurs should embrace to maintain their competitiveness in a dynamic business environment (Fernald *et al.*, 2005), and researchers have shown that

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1. Corresponding author: Professor Christian Harrison, University of Bolton, Greater Manchester Business School, Great Moor Street, Bolton BL11SW. Email: c.harrison2@bolton.ac.uk

entrepreneurial leadership is positively related to business performance (Ahmed and Harrison, 2021; Hmieleski and Ensley, 2007; Van Zyl and Mathur-Helm, 2007). Due to the recognition of the value of this new form of leadership in enhancing organisational performance, interest in entrepreneurial leadership has increased among scholars.

Several scholars (Flamholtz and Kannan-Narasimhan, 2013; Hejazi *et al.*, 2012; Renko *et al.*, 2015) have extended this view and emphasized the importance of recognising and exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities. By their focus on innovation and opportunity recognition, specifically in highly complex, turbulent and uncertain environments, entrepreneurial leaders not only create innovative ideas to overcome the challenges of their business but also direct the process of innovation and opportunity recognition in their business (Flamholtz, 2011; Flamholtz and Kannan-Narasimhan, 2013; Harrison *et al.*, 2018; Karol, 2015; Omeihe *et al.*, 2023; Swiercz and Lydon, 2002).

However, despite the growing interest and developing perspectives related to entrepreneurial leadership, empirical development of the concept has been hindered by the lack of focused research and the absence of adequate tools for assessing a leader's entrepreneurial characteristics and behaviours (Renko *et al.*, 2015). Notwithstanding the growing body of literature from both empirical and conceptual standpoints on entrepreneurial leadership (for example, Bagheri and Harrison, 2020; Coglisier and Brigham, 2004; Fernald *et al.*, 2005; Flamholtz, 2011; Flamholtz and Kannan-Narasimhan, 2013; Flamholtz and Randle, 2021; Gupta *et al.*, 2004; Kempster and Cope, 2010; Nicholson, 1998; Renko *et al.*, 2015; Swiercz and Lydon, 2002), there is limited consensus on the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial leadership.

Within the small firm context, the ways in which entrepreneurs learn to become leaders of their organisations have received little in-depth analysis (Kempster and Cope, 2010). Several theorists maintain that entrepreneurs are leaders by virtue of their position (Jensen and Luthans, 2006; Vecchio, 2003). However, it is vital to examine how entrepreneurs relate to the phenomenon of leadership and the extent to which they actively identify themselves as leaders.

Furthermore, if entrepreneurial leadership is important in enhancing organisational performance, it is paramount that this concept is also integrated into education programmes especially at the MBA and executive education levels, where you have students with post-education experience. Entrepreneurial leadership research in these programmes will provide the platform for creativity, innovation and opportunity recognition (Roomi and Harrison, 2011).

Through this special issue, our principal aim as guest editors is to promote the progress of this field by deepening our knowledge of leading in an entrepreneurial context. In doing so, we invited submissions that will enhance our present and future perspectives on leading in an entrepreneurial context. We welcomed 'research for' rather than 'research about' entrepreneurial leadership. We focused especially on empirical research on particular topics within the broad area of

entrepreneurial leadership. Yet we also sought studies that promote the value of entrepreneurial leadership in education programmes. The resulting collection of six articles gives the readers wide exposure to different thoughts and brings together a multidisciplinary perspective on the intersection between entrepreneurship and leadership.

## **2. Overview of Contributions**

The goal of this special issue is to deepen scholarly understanding of leading in an entrepreneurial context. An area which as guest editors we believe demands further research. To advance new knowledge and understanding of entrepreneurial leadership, we invited submissions to challenge the dominant perspectives. In our preoccupation with the relationship between leadership and entrepreneurship, we then looked at the submissions and wondered to what extent the articles selected in this issue were indicative of the overarching theme of leading in an entrepreneurial context. In claiming a perfect match, we believe the selected articles make valuable contributions to scholarly knowledge. All the contributions support the call's interest and were curated around the predefined theme. We selected six interesting articles, four of which are conceptual while the other two are empirical in nature. Together, the six selected articles provide well-defined constructs, clear boundary conditions and useful implications.

In the first article of this current issue, Fleck, Hutchinson and Withers (2023) employ a qualitative study to show the response of entrepreneurial leaders to a major crisis. The main aim of their study is to identify the behaviours and actions required while navigating a crisis. However, in contrast to previous studies, they share an understanding located at the interface of entrepreneurial leadership and crisis leadership of the key roles of the adaptive entrepreneurial leader. The article is a meaningful step towards a fine-grained understanding of the multifaceted and interchangeable roles necessary for entrepreneurial leaders. And as acknowledged in its implications section, it informs future studies on the need to consider the longer-term impact of protracted crisis to understand the impact of entrepreneurial leader roles on business performance.

The second article (Galloway, 2023) finds support for the relationship between thought leadership and leading people with reference to the entrepreneurial mindset theory. What makes this article notable and beyond the entrepreneur-start-up link, is the fact that it emphasises the role of entrepreneurial leaders in pioneering new offerings to motivate their followers. Entrepreneurial mindsets are rarely discussed in entrepreneurial leadership research and deserve more attention in general. Galloway (2023) highlights very neatly how entrepreneurship requires leading people in a way that encourages entrepreneurial mindsets throughout the new firm. From the findings, the author was able to draw three main conclusions. First, the overall entrepreneurial leadership vision for

new firms is central to attracting start-up talent and has a significant effect on growth. Second, person-based consultative approaches to leadership are necessary. For start-ups, the conveyance of a sense of distributed ownership and investment in the success of the firm are critical success factors. Third, Galloway (2023) speculates that beyond the need for passion, vision and communication, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are needed to enhance start-up performance.

In the third article, Bagheri and Simba (2023) build on calls for more research to explore the ways entrepreneurs lead individual learning among team members. In so doing, they provide penetrating insights into the underlying mechanism of leadership learning. The primary goal of their research is to understand the influential role of entrepreneurial leadership in leading learning within Iranian small businesses. For them, while the process of fostering learning in small businesses is extremely complex and fraught with challenges, adopting a leadership approach that focuses on self-and-functional competencies and the psychology of personal constructs is useful in nullifying obstacles associated with individual learning. By adopting a cognitive dimensional lens, Bagheri and Simba's (2023) research makes three important contributions to the field. First, from a transitioning economy perspective, they provide ample evidence to suggest that it is possible that the process of leading and directing individual learning in SMEs can be systemised. Second, this systemised approach demands far-reaching reflections by business leaders on self-and-functional competencies. Third, the study highlights that ensuring employees are receptive to learning stimuli is key to establishing a learning architecture. Their critical point recognises the leadership of learning as an emerging task of entrepreneurial leaders. The emphasis is that this provides both current and future entrepreneurs with some insights on how they can propagate learning in their ventures.

By undertaking a systematic review, Ahmed and Harrison's (2023) paper explores the development of entrepreneurial leadership skills and competencies. Their article provides unique insights into how skills and competencies are critically important for the success of organisations. They show, in our interpretation, how certain skills such as proactiveness, innovativeness and risk-taking propensity, and competencies such as personal, functional, technological, and interpersonal competencies are essential for entrepreneurial leadership. Interestingly, they argue that we shouldn't take skills and competencies for granted. But rather, we should view them as vital for exploiting business opportunities and coping with daunting business issues. In more general terms, the authors adopt a unique perspective by suggesting that entrepreneurial leadership is a social and contextual process, and as such learning strategies can be developed in various ways. We believe that this unique perspective may not be shared by most entrepreneurial leadership scholars. But we believe it should be considered for us to move beyond existing assumptions.

In the fifth article, Aluthgama-Baduge, Rajasinghe, Mansour and Mulholland (2023) employ an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore

educators' perspectives of entrepreneurial leadership. They argue that knowledge of entrepreneurial leadership development is limited and the effectiveness of development practices is contestable. This provocative argument may stir up some debate. Nevertheless, their focus on the placement of strong emphasis on co-creating education experiences with wider stakeholder involvement is worth highlighting. The authors argue forcefully for the imperative of 'handholding' to facilitate supportive learning conditions. These empirical insights challenge our current ontology on 'support' and encourage debate about wider support structures.

In the final paper of this special issue, Omeihe and Omeihe (2023) adopt a contextual lens to explore how entrepreneurial leadership pays off for small businesses. In their empirical paper, they demonstrate the seemingly valuable interplay between aspects of leaders' interpretations of entrepreneurial leadership and their relevance to small business growth. They argue that many leadership styles are not sufficient in making followers achieve goals and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities. At variance with prior studies, they propose a category of 28 attributes to describe features that make leaders entrepreneurial. They further advance the need for certain 'selective attributes' towards shaping the identification of entrepreneurial leaders. These attributes were found to reinforce one another and are useful for identifying potential successors. The authors carefully qualify their findings by raising important questions about the role of empathy and people management. Their findings suggest a simpler route as they indicate that since entrepreneurial leadership involves being self-aware of the expectations of group members, a lack of empathy and a poorly managed set of employees will negatively impact key aspects of the business.

### **3. Conclusion and Future Research Directions for Entrepreneurial Leadership**

Altogether, the contributions selected in this special issue serve their own original aims but more importantly encourage more thought on how to lead in contexts. We believe that together, the articles inspire research directions that will explore the origins, processes, dynamics as well as contextualised interpretations of entrepreneurial leadership. Nonetheless, while this issue provides new insights, we recognise that it simultaneously produces new avenues that demand further investigations. Viewed in this perspective, we believe that there should be future considerations of which entrepreneurial institutions are needed for the development of entrepreneurial behaviour. How do entrepreneurial leadership processes shape inter-organisational relationships? And do contextual factors influence entrepreneurial leadership outcomes?

These exciting six papers provides evidence of significant investment in research on entrepreneurial leadership and its role in contributing to knowledge.

That challenges remain in examining this topic is inevitable due to the developing nature of the field, but this should only encourage more research. Due to the nascent view of the field, we encourage more research on several countries that can expand the scope of the study. Such research across countries will provide novel thoughts and a more holistic picture on entrepreneurial leadership. We also advise that since entrepreneurial leadership has been shown to be effective in turbulent and dynamic settings, more research could examine the link between entrepreneurial leadership and crisis.

The papers we have compiled within this special issue provide new insights into entrepreneurial leadership and what it means to lead in an entrepreneurial context. These high-quality papers have drawn upon theories and concepts from a multidisciplinary perspective to explore contextual factors and conditions within entrepreneurial leadership. It enlarges our understanding of entrepreneurial leadership theoretically and methodologically. These papers are of practical value and should assist policy makers in providing opportunities supporting leadership within entrepreneurial contexts.

Finally, as with any effort of this scope, we gratefully acknowledge all the contributors to this special issue. Their high-quality papers which were selected after a thorough review process have provided a valuable contribution to the field. Special thanks to the Co-Editors in Chief of the *International Review of Entrepreneurship*; Professor Andrew Burke and Dr André van Stel for their support. This special issue would encourage more research in this area and we are grateful for the opportunity to continue the conversation.

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