by Shehzaad Shams

Eclectic Leadership: Rethinking How We Prepare Leaders for a Pluralistic World

Leadership education sits at a moment of quiet but profound transition. For much of the past half-century, business schools have relied on a familiar set of psychological models, management theories and case studies that grew out of Western corporate successes. These models have shaped generations of leaders and offered clarity during periods of rapid economic expansion. Yet many of the assumptions underpinning them now feel increasingly stretched.

Recent research reflects this tension. A 2023 McKinsey study reported that seven in ten senior leaders believe their organisations require a fundamentally different leadership model to navigate present-day complexity. The World Economic Forum's 2024 *Future of Jobs* survey likewise highlights cultural intelligence, ethical reasoning, communication and analytical thinking as the most critical emerging leadership competencies — none of which sit comfortably within older, siloed frameworks.

This shift has prompted growing interest in **Eclectic Leadership**: an approach that does not discard existing theories but weaves them together with insights from other disciplines and knowledge traditions that have long sat outside mainstream management education. The need for such an approach becomes clearer as the world becomes more interconnected, culturally plural and dependent on meaning-making than at any previous point in modern business history.

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A Broader Foundation for Modern Leadership

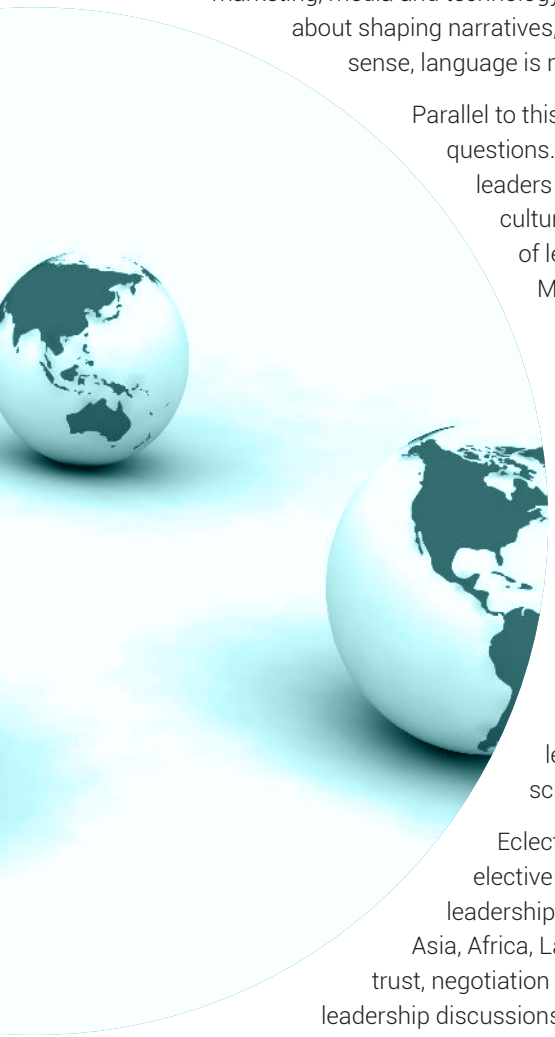
At its heart, Eclectic Leadership draws from four foundational domains: applied linguistics, applied psychology, political science and leadership development. Each is valuable in isolation. Combined, they offer a far richer, more realistic understanding of what leaders actually confront — and how they must think, speak and act to be effective in a globalised world.

Crucially, the eclectic approach also incorporates non-Western, indigenous and community-rooted leadership philosophies, which represent the lived experiences of a significant proportion of the global workforce but remain largely absent from standard business curricula.

The case for this broader, integrative model becomes even stronger when considering the generational and cultural shifts reshaping organisations. By 2030, people under 35 will make up more than 60% of the global workforce. This demographic is more diverse, more values-driven and more comfortable with hybrid and remote environments. The International Labour Organization notes that cross-border, cross-cultural teams have become the norm rather than the exception. Leaders who cannot interpret meaning across contexts — linguistic, cultural, emotional or political — risk losing credibility and cohesion in such environments.

Why the World Demands an Eclectic Approach

Economic change reinforces this trend. Communication-intensive industries — including consulting, diplomacy, marketing, media and technology — now account for more than 40% of global GDP. Leadership today is as much about shaping narratives, building trust and navigating ambiguity as it is about setting strategy. In this sense, language is not simply a medium for communication but the architecture of leadership itself.



Parallel to this, workplaces have become far more entangled with political and societal questions. Edelman's 2024 Trust Barometer reports that employees increasingly expect leaders to speak responsibly on social issues and to understand the institutional and cultural forces shaping public debate. This expectation sits firmly at the intersection of leadership and political science — an intersection rarely explored in traditional MBA settings.

And all of this is unfolding alongside rapid technological acceleration. Digital ecosystems, AI-enhanced decision-making and hybrid models of work require leaders who are not just knowledgeable but adaptable: able to translate insights across disciplines, reinterpret challenges and navigate systems rather than isolated problems.

What This Means for Business Schools

These shifts force an important question: does current leadership education reflect the world students will enter, or the world from which management theory originally evolved? Many institutions already recognise this gap. Fewer than 20% of leading MBA programmes meaningfully integrate non-Western leadership traditions into their curricula. Even fewer combine behavioural science, linguistics and public policy in a coherent, interdisciplinary way.

Eclectic Leadership offers a constructive path forward. Rather than adding more elective modules, it encourages a rebalancing of the intellectual foundations of leadership education. This could include integrating leadership philosophies from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Indigenous traditions; examining how language shapes trust, negotiation and identity; and embedding policy, governance and societal awareness into leadership discussions.

The purpose is not diversification for its own sake, but accuracy: leaders operate within political, cultural and linguistic systems, whether they acknowledge them or not.

Eclectic Leadership places reflective practice, empathy, responsibility, humility and ethical influence at the centre of decision-making — not as an appendix or optional segment but as the foundation of how leaders operate.

Curriculum design, therefore, becomes less about content delivery and more about shaping thinking. When applied through an eclectic lens, leadership education can move towards interdisciplinary modules that mirror real-world complexity — such as cross-cultural negotiation, behavioural governance, systems thinking, scenario-based decision-making and leadership with or within communities. Joint teaching by faculty from different departments, experiential learning with municipalities or NGOs, and simulations that incorporate power, identity, culture and institutional constraints can further strengthen this approach.

Re-centring Human Values and Personal Development

Human values also need to be re-anchored. Research from the University of Oxford has argued that many leadership programmes lack sufficient 'moral scaffolding'. Eclectic Leadership places reflective practice, empathy, responsibility, humility and ethical influence at the centre of decision-making — not as an appendix or optional segment but as the foundation of how leaders operate. It treats values as a lived discipline, not an abstract ideal.

For individuals, the implications are equally significant. Eclectic Leadership encourages a deeper exploration of how leaders understand themselves: how language shapes identity, how psychological patterns determine behaviour, how political and organisational structures shape opportunity, and how values influence choices. As a developmental pathway, it supports leaders in becoming adaptive thinkers — people who can translate ideas across contexts, notice patterns others overlook and navigate ambiguity with confidence.

Most importantly, it cultivates leaders who act as connectors rather than mere managers. Modern organisations, particularly those that operate across borders, function as networks rather than hierarchies. In these environments, leaders who can bridge cultures, translate disciplines and integrate perspectives are uniquely well positioned to foster innovation and organisational resilience.

A Leadership Model That Matches the Moment

Eclectic Leadership is not an argument against the great tradition of Western leadership theory; it is an argument for expanding the canon so it more accurately reflects the world as it actually is. No single framework — whether rooted in psychology, economics or organisational theory — can fully capture the multidimensional reality leaders face today.

The future belongs to those who can move between perspectives, negotiate complexity and maintain a human-centred grounding amid rapid change. For business schools, this means rethinking what is considered 'core'. For curriculum designers, it means embracing interdisciplinarity as a principle rather than a trend. For individuals, it offers a path to clarity, connection and responsible influence.

In a pluralistic, interdependent world defined by shifting power structures and cultural diversity, Eclectic Leadership provides a timely response — one that offers the intellectual breadth, ethical grounding and cultural fluency required for leaders to thrive and for organisations to navigate uncertainty with both competence and humanity.

About the author

Shehzaad Shams, is the founder of the Eclectic Leadership Movement. With over two decades of experience across business, education, and advisory roles, his work focuses on helping leaders navigate complexity through language, psychology, political science, and leadership techniques from pan-cultural, indigenous and principle based sources. www.rononiti.org