# Unleashing Strategic Leadership Potential: Embracing Stewardship Theory for Strategy Execution and Organizational Growth

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## Abstract

In today's dynamic and competitive business landscape, effective strategy execution is crucial for organizations to achieve their goals and sustain growth. However, conventional top-down, control-based leadership approaches often fall short of addressing the complexities of strategy implementation, prompting a search for alter-native frameworks. This conceptual paper employs a qualitative research framework, utilizing a comprehensive approach that combines literature review, emic perspective integration, synthesis of findings, and critical analysis. Drawing insights from stewardship theory and related literature, the findings reveal a distinctive leadership structure emphasizing employee empowerment, trust building, collaborative communication, and shared strategic leadership. Proposing an integrated leadership framework for strategy execution rooted in stewardship theory principles, the study advocates for a departure from conventional top-down control. This framework offers a structured approach for leaders, fostering innovation, commitment, and success in the pursuit of strategic objectives. The article concludes with suggestions for future studies, highlighting the need for contextual analysis and longitudinal studies to further enhance our understanding of effective leadership in strategy execution.

## Keywords

Strategic Leadership, Strategy Implementation, Strategy Execution, Stewardship Theory, Management

## 1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and competitive business environment, effective strategy

execution is undeniably crucial for organizational success and represents a potential source of competitive advantage (Tawse & Tabesh, 2020). Despite its acknowledged significance, strategy implementation poses a formidable leadership challenge, leaving researchers with an incomplete understanding of why some organizations excel in their execution compared to others (Greer et al., 2017; Neilson et al., 2008). This challenge becomes even more pronounced under the constraints of traditional top-down, control-based leadership approaches.

Recognizing the limitations of these conventional approaches, there is a growing acknowledgement that management models inspired by stewardship theory offer a practical structure for leaders navigating the intricacies of strategy implementation (for instance, Drennan et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2015; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). However, a significant gap exists in the literature—a comprehensive leadership framework explicitly grounded in stewardship theory principles is notably absent. This article aims to bridge this gap by shedding light on the latent potential of stewardship theory as an involvement-oriented leadership paradigm, capable of unlocking strategy execution capabilities within organizations.

The primary objective of this study is to derive an integrated leadership framework for strategy implementation firmly rooted in stewardship theory principles (Schillemans, 2013). Through this exploration, the article seeks to identify leadership behaviours and practices that play a crucial role in stimulating and facilitating employees' engagement with overall corporate strategic objectives.

Unlike the control-based agency theory (Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2019), stewardship theory advocates for a departure from the conventional top-down control. Instead, it emphasizes leaders' role in cultivating a culture of trust and collaborative communication within their teams (Schillemans, 2013). Empowering employees with a sense of ownership and autonomy becomes pivotal, enabling leaders to tap into their intrinsic motivation, dedication, and expertise to align with the organization's strategic goals.

It is noteworthy that the terms "strategy execution" and "strategy implementation" are often used interchangeably in the related literature (Hrebiniak, 2006). Similarly, the distinction between "management" and "leadership" is not always clear, given that both roles are fundamentally concerned with the overall success of the company (Nienaber, 2010). In consideration of these nuances, the article adopts interchangeable use of terms such as strategy execution and implementation, management and leadership, and managers and leaders. Through this comprehensive exploration, the article aspires to contribute valuable insights to guide leaders in fostering a culture that propels successful strategy implementation and organizational growth.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Strategic Leadership Challenge and Its Implications for Organizations

#### 2.1.1. Leadership Challenge
Strategic leadership is pivotal for organizational success in the ever-evolving 21st-

century environment (Jaleha & Machuki, 2018). It is defined by functions performed at the highest organizational level, involving decisions and actions with strategic consequences (Samimi et al., 2022). These actions, spanning formulation, implementation, and control, aim to realize the organization's vision, mission, strategy, and strategic objectives (Pearce & Robinson, 2007). Despite human resources playing a crucial role in achieving organizational goals (Mulyani et al., 2019), research indicates that implementation issues, rather than formulation, significantly contribute to strategic plan failures (Gande & Hlophe, 2023; Hrebiniak, 2013).

However, the effectiveness of strategic leadership is hampered by execution-related problems (Verweire, 2014). The complexity of executing an approved strategy is heightened as it necessitates comprehensive understanding and alignment throughout the organization (MacLennan, 2011; Radomska & Kozyra, 2020). Studies reveal a considerable misalignment between enterprise accountability and leadership in strategy execution, leading to failure rates ranging from 50 to 90 percent in strategy implementation (Cándido & Santos, 2015; Jorgensen, 2014; Wiles, 2020). Even well-formulated strategies can falter due to poor execution (American Management Association, 2007). Successful strategy implementation demands more than well-designed plans; it requires a comprehensive approach (Kalali et al., 2011).

The managerial creation of strategies often contrasts sharply with their execution by executors across various organizational levels (Li et al., 2008). Lower-level management and non-management staff frequently find themselves tasked with implementing strategies without considering resultant functional-level perceptions (Martin, 2010; Nutt, 1987). Potential resistance from bottom-level employees, fearing unwelcome changes, further exacerbates the challenge (Li et al., 2008). Achieving consensus on organizational strategy goals becomes elusive without a defined boundary for decision-making and execution (Martin, 2010). Organizations fostering open and supportive communication climates tend to outperform those with restrictive communication environments (Rapert et al., 2002).

Research indicates that a critical factor contributing to the crisis in the successful implementation of organizational strategies is the efficient utilization of human resources. Aligning organizational strategic objectives with the day-to-day operations of individual employees remains a persistent challenge (Hrebiniak, 2008). Linking strategic objectives with employees' day-to-day activities at different organizational levels proves to be a challenging task (Stiffler, 2004). This discrepancy between "choosers" involved in strategy formulation and "choiceless doers" responsible for implementation creates an "execution trap" (Martin, 2010), leading to poor employee engagement, frustration, disengagement, and decreased productivity (Mezeger & Violani, 2010).

Against the outlined backdrop, it becomes evident that the successful execution of organizational strategies requires a holistic and integrated approach. Bridging the gap between strategy formulation and execution demands more than

well-designed plans; it necessitates a comprehensive understanding and alignment across all levels of the organization. The persistent challenges of misalignment, resistance, and the "execution trap" underscore the need for innovative leadership frameworks. The proposed integrated leadership framework for enhancing strategy implementation, rooted in stewardship theory principles, offers a structured and forward-thinking approach. By fostering a culture of employee empowerment, trust-building, collaborative communication, and shared strategic leadership, organizations can not only overcome implementation hurdles but also cultivate a climate of innovation, commitment, and success in the dynamic landscape of the 21st century.

### 2.1.2. Implications

Strategic leadership's profound implications for organizations are underscored by its role as a key driver, fostering employee motivation, engagement, and productivity (Anand, 2017). Brinkschröder (2014) emphasizes the direct link between the success or failure of strategies and how leaders implement them. Building on this, Rayton and Yalabik (2014) argue that the quality of the relationship between leaders and employees is pivotal in determining the extent of employee engagement. Engaged employees, as Nasomboon (2014) notes, align their focus with the organization's goals, resulting in positive performance and growth under effective leadership.

Conversely, ineffective leadership becomes a source of employee disengagement, leading to absenteeism, high turnover, and conflicts that detrimentally impact organizational effectiveness (Popli & Rizvi, 2015). Rastogi et al. (2018) identified factors such as a lack of job resources, control, complexity, and organizational support contributing to employee disengagement. Studies consistently affirm that leadership styles emphasizing control, micromanagement, and extrinsic motivations can have dysfunctional effects on employees' behaviour (Akroyd & Kober, 2020; Bhimani, 2003; Ong et al., 2019; Sugita & Takahashi, 2015).

Recognizing the crucial role of leadership styles in strategy implementation, scholars stress the importance of understanding when to apply them for successful execution (Alamsjah, 2020; Mubarak & Yusoff, 2019). Overcoming lower-level "obstructionism" in implementation efforts requires strategic managerial tactics and leadership styles (Nutt, 1986; Nyong'a & Maina, 2019). Leadership practices such as management commitment, participative leadership, motivation systems, and delegation have been identified as positively influencing the implementation of organizational strategy (Nyong'a & Maina, 2019). Job involvement and trust emerge as primary determinants of organizational effectiveness, with trust playing a key role in creating employee motivation (Nasomboon, 2014).

Arguably, leadership behaviour that encourages autonomy, intrinsic rewards, and influence becomes paramount in achieving employee engagement and, consequently, successful strategy implementation (Bolman & Deal, 2014). In this context, Ikiara and Kariuki (2018) stress the importance of leaders ensuring followers are empowered and encouraged to take responsibility for the group's de-

cisions and actions, creating a culture supportive of employee commitment to organizational strategy execution (Nwachukwu et al., 2018).

As evidence accumulates regarding the motivational inefficiency and detrimental effects of control-based management approaches on organizational employees (Jacobsen et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2009), there arises a need to explore alternative philosophical assumptions and leadership practices. The stewardship theory (Hernandez, 2012; Schillemans, 2013) emerges as a novel alternative to the dominant top-down management approach.

However, a notable void exists in understanding the specific components of strategic leadership within the stewardship theory framework. While the dominant agency theory has undergone extensive review in various organizational contexts and hierarchical levels, stewardship theory research has primarily focused on the owner/principal and manager/steward relationship (Kloninger, 2010; Podrug, 2010). To address this gap, this study aims to extend the principles of stewardship theory to encompass bottom-line employees and conceptualize its application across lower levels in organizations.

In the subsequent section, the underlying assumptions of stewardship theory and its relevance to enhancing strategy execution will be discussed briefly.

## 2.2. Stewardship Theory: A Strategic Leadership Framework

### 2.2.1. Stewardship Theory: A Brief Overview

In the context of strategic leadership, the stewardship theory, as conceptualized by Donaldson and Davis (1991), introduces a compelling and innovative perspective that challenges conventional management paradigms. This theory fundamentally transforms governance and resource management within organizations, moving away from the constraints posed by traditional agency theory. Central to stewardship theory is the notion that there is no inherent conflict of interest between employees and management; instead, governance aims to establish mechanisms fostering efficient coordination between these two parties (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012).

Key to this theory is the belief that organizational actors are inherently pro-organization, cooperative, and collectivist in their behaviour. In contrast to agency theory's assumption of opportunistic and self-interested conduct, stewardship theory recognizes that employees are intrinsically motivated to serve the organization's interests rather than pursuing personal gains (Davis et al., 1997; Podrug, 2010). This perspective underscores the importance of nurturing relationship-centred collaboration within the organization, promoting trust and dependable behaviour among employees (Davis et al., 1997).

Crucially, stewardship theory asserts that autonomy and responsibility are pivotal motivators for employees (Donaldson, 2008). Excessive control by managers can stifle the development of stewardship behaviour, emphasizing the need for organizations to embrace intrinsic factors in managing their workforce (Davis et al., 1997). Additionally, the theory underscores the significance of maintaining a relatively low power distance in the manager-employee relationship, achieved

through personal forms of power. This involves cultivating bonds of loyalty and respect while reducing the need for excessive control and oversight (Davis et al., 1997).

### 2.2.2. Relevance of Stewardship Theory in Strategy Execution

A fundamental inquiry for this investigation revolves around the significance of stewardship theory in the context of strategy execution. Specifically, the consideration arises as to whether the selection of a management or leadership approach holds critical implications, particularly in the course of implementing a strategic plan. Notably, Oliński and Szamrowski (2020) have observed a noteworthy correlation between stewardship theory and the improvement of strategy implementation, rooted in the capacity of stewardship theory to provide an alternative leadership framework that effectively addresses the challenges inherent in the execution of strategic initiatives.

Consequently, exploring the relationship between stewardship theory and strategy execution becomes imperative for a comprehensive understanding of effective organizational leadership in this context. Within the confines of this article, the explication of the relationship between Stewardship Theory and the advancement of strategy executions is deconstructed as follows:

Firstly, stewardship theory advocates a departure from traditional top-down, bureaucratic control (Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Instead of micromanaging, it promotes self-management and shared responsibility among employees. This shift aligns with the demands of effective strategy execution in a rapidly changing business environment, where quick adaptation and innovation are imperative. Empowering employees to take ownership of their roles and decisions related to strategy execution fosters agility and responsiveness.

Secondly, stewardship theory emphasizes fostering a culture of trust and promoting collaborative communication. Trust is crucial in strategy execution, as it encourages open dialogue, reduces resistance to change, and facilitates effective collaboration (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Mutual trust and openness lead to proactive problem-solving, shared understanding, and collaboration, essential for successful strategy implementation. This connection underscores the necessity of commitment and involvement from managers and employees at all levels. Committed employees execute the strategy.

Thirdly, stewardship theory aligns with shared leadership practices, distributing leadership responsibilities based on expertise and situational needs. This approach empowers employees at all levels, enhancing strategically aligned behaviour and reducing the risk of strategic misalignment (Boswell et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2009; Van Der Maas, 2017). Employee participation in decision-making processes during strategy implementation enhances commitment and acceptance of outcomes.

Furthermore, the theory underscores the role of psychological ownership in driving employee motivation. When employees possess a sense of psychological

ownership, they are internally driven to safeguard and advance the organization's interests (Avey et al., 2009; Pierce et al., 2003). This ownership mind-set instils a willingness to sacrifice personal goals to achieve the organization's strategic objectives. Thus, the essence of stewardship theory's relevance in strategy execution is encapsulated in its intrinsic attributes, which involve embracing empowerment, cultivating trust through collaborative communication, and promoting shared leadership practices. These elements function as crucial mediators that not only enhance employee engagement but also substantially contribute to the cultivation of psychological ownership within the organizational members.

While stewardship theory offers promising perspectives, its practical implementation in strategy execution faces challenges. Assumptions may not fully encompass all influencing factors, and cultural aspects like collectivism and low power distance can sometimes complicate matters. Some advocate combining stewardship principles with agency theory to address these challenges (Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Nonetheless, organizations seeking alternative approaches to managing personnel and enhancing strategy implementation may want to seek inspiration from the assumptions proffered by stewardship theory. By prioritizing empowerment, fostering trust, and advocating for collaborative leadership practices, stewardship theory establishes a framework that seamlessly aligns with the objectives of effective organizational leadership during strategy implementation. The empowerment of teams and the nurturance of a sense of ownership among employees translate into a heightened commitment to strategy implementation, thereby increasing the likelihood of success. Engaged and motivated employees, driven by a sense of ownership, are more inclined to dedicate themselves to the attainment of the organization's strategic goals, striving to deliver their optimal contributions.

### 2.2.3. Empirical Insights: A Review of Prior Literature on Stewardship Theory-Based Management

In the examination of stewardship theory-based management approaches, empirical evidence underscores the positive outcomes achieved by organizations embracing core stewardship principles. While a specific management model aligned with stewardship theory may not be explicitly identified, research consistently demonstrates that leadership practices inspired by stewardship theory contribute significantly to organizational success.

A notable exemplification of the efficacy of stewardship-inspired leadership is found in the qualitative case study conducted by Torfing & Bentzen (2020) at the Job and Activity Center (JAC) in Gentofte Municipality, Denmark. This study provides insights into the practical implementation and outcomes of a trust-based management model within Public Service Organizations (PSOs). Torfing & Bentzen (2020) illuminate a departure from traditional control-oriented management, highlighting mutual trust, collaborative decision-making, and employee empowerment. The study showcases the positive impact of stewardship principles

on employee motivation, well-being, and organizational performance, affirming the success of JAC's innovative trust-based management practices.

Building on these findings, further support for trust-based management and self-regulating teams emerges from a case study on the Dutch homecare provider Buurtzorg. Gray et al. (2015) reveal that the Buurtzorg model, deeply rooted in stewardship principles, has successfully delivered high-quality, cost-effective home care with elevated patient and employee satisfaction. This positive outcome is corroborated by Drennan et al. (2018), who conducted a mixed-methods case study evaluating the adapted Buurtzorg model's impact on an English district nursing service. The results highlight the model's feasibility, acceptability, and positive outcomes in terms of service responsiveness and efficiency.

Further insights are gained from the study conducted by Schillemans and Bjurstrøm (2019), which explores the governance of (quasi-)autonomous agencies in the Dutch context. This study strategically combines trust-based stewardship theory and control-based agency theory, revealing that a balanced integration of both approaches enhances overall satisfaction with the governance regime. Notably, stewardship theory's principles, such as identifying shared interests, developing a shared perspective on tasks, and expressing praise for good performance, are strongly correlated with participant satisfaction. This balanced integration challenges the notion of a trade-off between control and trust, providing a nuanced perspective on effective governance for (quasi-)autonomous agencies.

These empirical studies consistently point towards the positive impact of stewardship principles on organizational success, shedding light on the potential of trust-based management models for strategy execution and growth.

## 3. Methodology

This is a conceptual paper. Within a qualitative research framework, I have employed a comprehensive approach that combines various research methods to synthesize existing literature and incorporate diverse perspectives. The primary methodological components used in this conceptual paper include literature review, emic perspective integration, synthesis of findings, and critical analysis. This methodological approach aims to offer a nuanced and comprehensive conceptual understanding by leveraging the strengths of multiple research methods, integrating diverse literature studies, and incorporating emic perspectives in a balanced manner.

The exploration of stewardship theory as an alternative leadership perspective signifies a noteworthy paradigm shift towards the "Holistic Collaborative Leadership" approach, departing from the conventional leader-centric, bureaucratic control-oriented paradigm (Torfing & Bentzen, 2020; Vallentin & Thygesen, 2017). Advocating for the creation of an environment fostering self-management, shared responsibility, and collective ownership among employees, stewardship theory posits that individuals, when provided with appropriate conditions and support, are inherently motivated to act in the organization's best interest (Hernandez,

2012; Kluvers & Tippett, 2011; Schillemans & Basuioc, 2015).

This assumption resonates well with empirical studies of staff empowerment in organizations that show that trust-based power-sharing improves organizational performance, promotes innovativeness, increases employee motivation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, and promotes employee goal alignment (Drennan et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2015; Raja Hisham et al., 2020; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). The "Holistic Collaborative Leadership" paradigm advocated by stewardship theory aligns with these findings, emphasizing the positive outcomes associated with a more inclusive and participatory leadership approach.

Analysing leadership practices and behaviours significant to strategy implementation within the context of stewardship theory reveals four key components: employee empowerment, trust-building, collaborative communication, and shared strategic leadership. A deeper examination of these components exposes robust connections with various well-established leadership styles.

Trust, closely linked to servant leadership, emerges as a pivotal element in leading implementation efforts (Du Plessis et al., 2015; Joseph & Winston, 2005; Pawar et al., 2020). A trusting organizational climate encourages a sense of personal responsibility among employees, fostering collaboration, risk-taking, and a shared commitment to common goals (Davis et al., 1997; Schillemans, 2013). Job involvement and trust are key determinants of organizational effectiveness (Nasomboon, 2014; Metz et al., 2022), serving as cornerstones for the successful execution of strategies and nurturing a culture of empowerment, where confident employees make decisions and take ownership of responsibilities without constant micromanagement.

Transitioning to collaborative communication, which involves open information exchange and interactive discussions (O'hara et al., 2011), this study finds that such communication, promoting openness, inclusivity, and joint effort, mirrors inclusive leadership (Aksu & Aktas, 2020) and transformational leadership (Reinke, 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Essential for leveraging diversity, collaborative communication fosters inclusivity and a shared understanding of organizational objectives (Booysen, 2013; Randel et al., 2018). It leads to improved employee commitment and enhances strategy execution by promoting open idea-sharing and synergistic collaboration. Positive face-to-face interactions integral to collaborative communication allow team members to appreciate their collective responsibility toward tasks (Doz & Kosonen, 2007), contributing to smoother execution and organizational adaptability (Oreg & Berson, 2011).

The management style of employee empowerment, emphasizing autonomy and decision-making delegation (Byham, 1992), mirrors the essence of horizontal and shared leadership. Distributing leadership responsibilities across team members enhances strategically aligned behaviour, connecting employees to the organization's functioning (Pearce et al., 2008; Carson et al., 2007). Autonomy, ability, and motivation are crucial for developing strategically aligned behaviour (Hansson & Mårtensson, 2011). Self-management strategies, correlated with

higher engagement levels and employee involvement, contribute significantly to successful strategy execution (Breevaart et al., 2014). Leaders' influence on subordinates' attitudes and behaviours through empowerment is well-documented (Bass, 1999; Behling & McFillen, 1996; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Empowered employees demonstrate higher work performance, motivation, and innovative behaviour (Cotton et al., 1988; Leana, 1986; Kanter, 1983), making pivotal contributions to successful strategy execution (Spreitzer, 1995).

Shared leadership decisions, entailing the distribution of responsibilities and aligning with distributed and shared leadership principles (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Pearce et al., 2009), positively influence strategic and organizational matters, according to (Socialtilsyn Hovedstaden, 2019, as cited in Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Allowing employees to participate in decision-making regarding strategy implementation leads to enhanced employee performance (Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994; Ye et al., 2007). Leaders who permit employee participation in decision-making enhance team innovation, creativity, and overall performance, establishing it as a valuable asset for successful strategy implementation (Pearce, 2004). Notably, potential barriers to strategy execution, such as poor harmonization across functions and insufficient down-the-line leadership skills, underscore the importance of involving everyone in strategy execution, emphasizing the need for understanding and effective contribution at all levels (Ye et al., 2007). Shared strategic decisions cultivate a sense of dedication and accountability by empowering staff members at all levels to offer their ideas and take ownership of their roles (Smith, 2009; Pearce et al., 2009). Ultimately, shared strategic leadership encourages employees to feel self-efficacious, increasing their drive and commitment to attaining strategic goals.

In conclusion, the adoption of stewardship theory principles unfolds as a pathway toward a "Holistic Collaborative Leadership" approach. The insights gleaned from this study highlight the complex interweaving of the holistic collaborative leadership approach with established leadership styles such as servant leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and inclusive leadership within stewardship relationships. Notably, this approach diverges from the conventional practice of framing a pre-designed vision and mission. Instead, it invites employees to actively participate in co-creating the organizational goals and values, fostering a profound sense of ownership of the overarching vision.

As articulated by Torfing and Bentzen (2020), the formation and communication of visions and values in the stewardship-inspired leadership approach serve not only to motivate individual employees but also to frame collaborative interactions and strategic dialogues between leaders and employees. This exemplifies that holistic collaborative leadership is more than a mere leadership style; it stands as a transformative approach seamlessly integrating empowerment, trust, communication, and shared leadership practices into the core fabric of organizational culture. Moreover, it strategically incorporates key principles from well-established leadership styles, contributing to the establishment of a dynamic and

inclusive organizational leadership structure—essentially a holistic collaborative leadership structure.

By purposefully leveraging these pillars, organizations can cultivate alignment, spur innovation, and instil unwavering commitment, thereby paving the way for success in their journey of strategy implementation. This leadership approach not only underscores the positive correlation between stewardship principles and successful strategy execution but also reinforces the significance of these findings, aligning with prior research conducted by Bass & Riggio (2006), Spreitzer (1995), Pearce et al. (2009), Raja Hisham, et al. (2020), Oliński & Szamrowski (2020), and Ye, Marinova, and Singh (2007).

## The Proposed Integrated Leadership Framework for Strategy Execution

Leadership stands as a linchpin in sculpting an environment conducive to the triumphant implementation of strategies (Alamsjah, 2020; Azhar et al., 2013). In light of these insights, the author posits an integrated framework designed to guide leaders as they endeavour to foster an environment favourable for the successful execution of strategies. This proposed Integrated Leadership Framework for Strategy Implementation arises from a meticulous synthesis of pertinent literature and draws inspiration from stewardship perspectives on governance. Illustrated in Figure 1, the integrated leadership framework embraces a holistic collaborative approach that incorporates four pivotal pillars: Employee Empowerment, Trust Building, Collaborative Communication, and Shared Strategic Leadership. Each facet is intricately interwoven into the essence of effective organizational leadership, offering tangible management practices. To enhance comprehension of the framework, the underlying rationales necessitating these leadership actions are also explicated.

The portrayed Figure 1 illustrates that, within the realm of *Employee Empowerment*, the framework advocates for a transformative cultural shift. It urges organizational leaders and managers to cultivate a climate that values autonomy and delegates decision-making, emphasizing the interconnectedness between employees and the overall organizational functioning. This pillar's rationale under-scores the critical role of autonomy, ability, and motivation in cultivating behaviour aligned with strategic objectives. Through the empowerment of individuals across all hierarchical levels, organizations can harness elevated levels of engagement and innovation, thereby propelling the trajectory toward successful strategy execution (Breevaart et al., 2014; Cotton et al., 1988; Drennan et al., 2018; Hansson & Mårtensson, 2011; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

*Trust Building* emerges as a foundational cornerstone within the framework shown in Figure 1, encouraging leaders to foster an environment where trust is not merely an element but a fundamental core. This involves a commitment to trust-based relationships, the promotion of open communication, collaboration, and a risk-tolerant culture. The basis for Trust Building accentuates trust's catalytic impact, fostering personal responsibility, enhancing collaboration, and
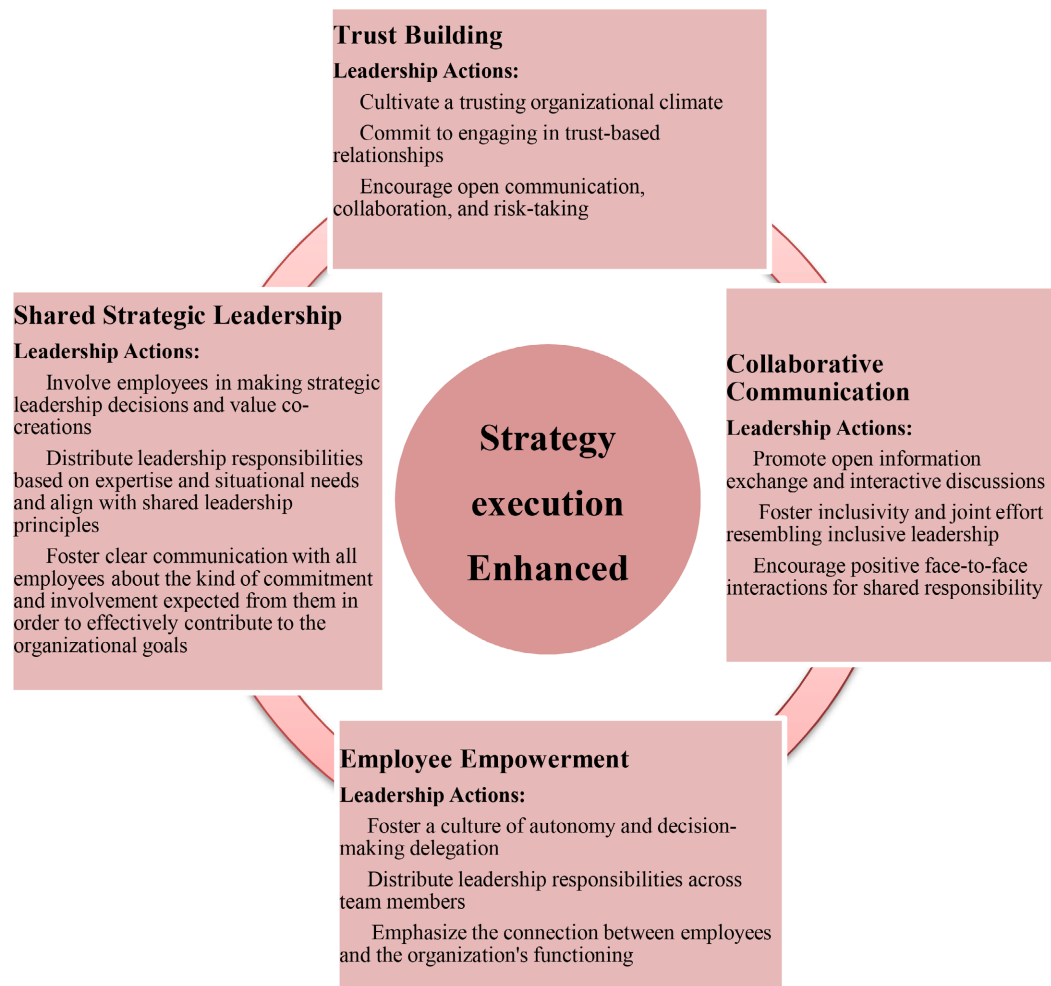
**Trust Building**
**Leadership Actions:**
Cultivate a trusting organizational climate
Commit to engaging in trust-based relationships
Encourage open communication, collaboration, and risk-taking

**Shared Strategic Leadership**
**Leadership Actions:**
Involve employees in making strategic leadership decisions and value co-creations
Distribute leadership responsibilities based on expertise and situational needs and align with shared leadership principles
Foster clear communication with all employees about the kind of commitment and involvement expected from them in order to effectively contribute to the organizational goals

**Strategy execution Enhanced**

**Collaborative Communication**
**Leadership Actions:**
Promote open information exchange and interactive discussions
Foster inclusivity and joint effort resembling inclusive leadership
Encourage positive face-to-face interactions for shared responsibility

**Employee Empowerment**
**Leadership Actions:**
Foster a culture of autonomy and decision-making delegation
Distribute leadership responsibilities across team members
Emphasize the connection between employees and the organization's functioning

**Figure 1.** Integrated leadership framework for enhancing strategy execution.

influencing organizational effectiveness across diverse levels (Metz et al., 2022; Nasomboon, 2014; Schillemans, 2013). Within a trusting environment, employees are empowered to assume ownership, diminishing the need for constant micromanagement and fostering a climate conducive to strategic execution.

The third pillar, *Collaborative Communication*, advocates for transparency, inclusivity, and positive interpersonal interactions. This component aligns with inclusive leadership and transformational leadership, fostering a workplace where diverse perspectives are valued, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging joint efforts. The rationale underlying Collaborative Communication emphasizes its role in cultivating inclusivity, creating a shared understanding of organizational objectives, and enhancing employee commitment—all crucial elements contributing to the successful execution of organizational strategies (Aksu & Aktas, 2020; Doz & Kosonen, 2007; Oreg & Berson, 2011).

Concluding the framework is *Shared Strategic Leadership*, emphasizing the active involvement of employees in decision-making processes, the distribution of responsibilities, and a collective understanding at all organizational levels. The rationale highlights the positive impact of collaborative decision-making on

team innovation, dedication, accountability, and increased commitment to achieving strategic goals (Gray et al., 2015; Raja Hisham, et al., 2020; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

The Integrated Leadership Framework serves as a strategic guide for organizations, offering a blueprint that promotes alignment, innovation, and steadfast commitment throughout the intricate journey of strategy implementation.

Figure 1 visually encapsulates the interconnected nature of these components, offering a comprehensive guide for organizations aiming to unleash their strategic leadership potential. By fostering a culture of employee empowerment, trust-building, collaborative communication, and shared strategic leadership, organizations can not only overcome implementation hurdles but also cultivate a climate of innovation, commitment, and success in the dynamic landscape of the 21$^{st}$ century.

## 4. Discussions

In the contemporary business landscape, the challenge of achieving sustained growth and competitive advantages through effective strategy implementation is a critical concern for organizations (Greer et al., 2017; Hrebiniak, 2013). Despite the prevalence of traditional top-down, control-based leadership approaches, these methods often lead to what Martin (2010) aptly terms an "execution trap," resulting in poor employee engagement, frustration, disengagement, and decreased productivity (Mezeger & Violani, 2010). Responding to this challenge, this study sheds light on a distinctive leadership structure inherent in stewardship principles—a holistic collaborative approach that deviates from the conventional control-oriented paradigm (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This approach posits that organizational employees derive motivation from meaningful tasks contributing value to others, emphasizing goal harmonization between leaders and employees (Hansson & Mårtensson, 2011; Hernandez, 2012; Kluvers & Tippett 2011; Raja Hisham, et al., 2020).

The findings underscore the potential of stewardship theory to address the shortcomings of traditional leadership approaches in achieving effective strategy execution. Organizations aiming for a competitive edge may benefit from embracing the assumptions embedded in the stewardship theory, fostering increased goal alignment, employee engagement, and commitment—crucial elements for successful strategy execution.

However, it is essential to approach these findings with nuance. This article does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution for strategy execution but rather explores aspects of leadership that may prove more effective in diverse institutional contexts, considering variations in employee satisfaction, work engagement, and commitment.

A critical consideration is the limited scope of the literature review, which predominantly focuses on organizations adopting trust-based management inspired by stewardship theory. While this could potentially introduce bias, it also

reveals a nuanced reality. Notably, Torfing & Bentzen (2020) observed that some employees, despite being in a trust-based leadership environment, preferred less empowerment and involvement. This observation challenges a one-dimensional view of leadership and underscores the need for a balanced approach that acknowledges the diverse preferences and needs of employees.

The connection established between the principles of stewardship theory and enhanced strategy implementation aligns with Oliński & Szamrowski's (2020) assertion that stewardship theory emphasizes organizational goals over individual goals. Leadership, according to this perspective, should enable employees to prioritize the interests and well-being of the organization over personal gain, fostering active participation in strategy implementation aligned with organizational goals (Saputra, 2022).

Beyond the scope of this study, other research highlights stewardship theory's relevance in various contexts. Dicke (2002) calls for further exploration of the relationship between stewardship theory and accountability in contracted human services, while Mills and Keast (2009) suggest that governance arrangements informed by stewardship theory can enhance stewardship outcomes in major infrastructure projects. Murtaza et al. (2021) underscore the role of stewardship theory in understanding the connection between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and pro-environmental behaviour, mediated by servant leadership. Contrafatto (2014) provides a comprehensive analysis of stewardship theory, emphasizing its normative foundations and organizational implications, offering insights into social and organizational dynamics in the pursuit of sustainability.

This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective leadership for strategy implementation. By highlighting the potential of stewardship theory, it encourages organizations to reconsider their leadership approaches, acknowledging the importance of employee engagement, trust, and collaborative decision-making. While recognizing the diversity in employee preferences, this discussion underscores the relevance of stewardship principles in fostering a dynamic and inclusive organizational leadership structure that positively influences strategy execution.

## 5. Conclusion

This article explored the complexities of strategy execution, recognizing it as a critical challenge for organizations navigating today's competitive business environment. Traditional top-down, control-based leadership approaches have proven insufficient, prompting a search for alternative frameworks. Grounded in stewardship theory, this study explored an involvement-oriented leadership paradigm, unveiling its potential to unlock strategy implementation capabilities within organizations.

The findings illuminated a distinctive "holistic collaborative" leadership structure characterized by employee empowerment, trust building, collaborative com-

munication, and shared strategic leadership. Drawing from stewardship theory principles, the integrated leadership framework for strategy implementation was proposed. This framework offers a structured approach for leaders to navigate the complexities of strategy implementation, fostering innovation, commitment, and success in pursuit of strategic objectives.

While this study contributes valuable insights, the dynamic nature of organizational leadership and strategy implementation calls for continued exploration. Future studies may consider investigating how the proposed framework performs in different organizational contexts, industries, and cultural settings to ensure its adaptability and effectiveness across diverse environments. A longitudinal study to assess the sustainability and long-term impact of stewardship theory-inspired leadership on strategy execution outcomes can also be conducted. By addressing these aspects, future research can further enrich our understanding of effective leadership in strategy execution, contributing to the continuous evolution of organizational practices in dynamic business environments.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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