

## Re-coding Leadership Legitimacy in Gendered Organizations: MAN+ as a Counter-Script to Masculinity Contest, Ideal-Worker, and Unequal Conditions of Authority

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### Abstract

*This theory-building article advances MAN+ as a counter-script for re-coding leadership legitimacy in gendered organizations. The article starts from a persistent blind spot in leadership scholarship: influential theories explain ethics, motivation, authenticity, and trust with growing sophistication, yet still under-specify the gendered conditions under which leader behaviours become recognizable as credible authority. In many organizations, leadership is tacitly authorized through a legacy masculine script that prizes invulnerability, domination, relentless work devotion, emotional restriction, and exemption from repair. Drawing together feminist organization theory, hegemonic masculinity, masculinity contest culture, ideal-worker scholarship, role congruity, status beliefs, precarious manhood, psychological safety, ethical leadership, engagement, and burnout research, the article conceptualizes these legacy scripts as legitimacy regimes rather than merely personal styles. MAN+ specifies four mutually reinforcing dimensions of an alternative script: Mindful authority, Accountable power, Nurturing standards, and Purposeful stewardship. The article makes six contributions. First, it theorizes masculinity as an organizational script operating at the interface of culture, legitimacy, and control. Second, it clarifies why legacy scripts remain sticky even when they are costly. Third, it identifies the discriminant theoretical surplus of MAN+ relative to adjacent leadership frameworks by centring the gendered recognizability of authority. Fourth, it specifies mechanisms linking counter-scripting to voice, learning, repair, inclusion, ethical restraint, and sustainable performance. Fifth, it develops propositions, moderators, and boundary conditions through which the model can be critically examined rather than normatively celebrated. Sixth, it integrates intersectional cautions and risks of managerial co-optation so the framework is not misread as either a men-centred remedy or a substitute for structural reform. The result is a more precise bridge between gender-and-organization scholarship and leadership development, offering a vocabulary for analysing how organizations might de-authorize harmful norms of strength without romanticizing care, privatizing inequality, or depoliticizing power.*

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**Keywords:** masculinity scripts; masculinity contest culture; gendered organizations; ideal-worker norm; leadership legitimacy; psychological safety; ethical leadership; intersectionality; burnout; organizational culture.

## Introduction

Leadership scholarship has become increasingly sophisticated in explaining influence, motivation, trust, and performance. Yet the practical image of a strong leader in many workplaces remains remarkably old. Strength is still frequently coded as emotional restraint, fast certainty, status defence, relentless work devotion, immunity from correction, and the ability to impose pressure without visibly absorbing any human cost. These expectations are often treated as managerial common sense. This article argues that they are better understood as gendered organizational scripts.

The point is not that all men lead this way, nor that masculinity is reducible to pathology. The point is more precise: organizations often authorize leadership through a culturally masculine script that makes some performances of authority feel natural and others suspect. Once normalized, that script becomes consequential at multiple levels. It shapes what counts as executive presence, which emotions are admissible, how accountability is enacted, how care is judged, what forms of dissent are tolerated, and whose conduct is recognized as competent, serious, or leader-like. In that sense, masculinity matters to leadership not only as identity, but as institutionalized legitimacy.

This framing places the article at the intersection of literatures that still converse less than they should. Feminist and gender-and-organization scholarship has long shown that organizations are not neutral containers in which gender merely happens; they are themselves gendering arrangements that code

authority, work devotion, embodiment, and career success in patterned ways. Leadership studies, by contrast, has generated powerful vocabularies for analysing ethical conduct, development, authenticity, voice, and engagement, but often under-specifies the gendered cultural conditions under which those practices are interpreted, rewarded, or rejected. MAN+ is proposed as a bridge between these conversations.

The article develops MAN+ as a theory-building framework for re-writing leadership legitimacy in contexts shaped by masculinity contest and ideal-worker norms. Rather than treating masculinity as a stable trait, MAN+ conceptualizes it as a script: a socially learned and organizationally reinforced pattern regarding what strong leadership is supposed to look like. The framework then specifies an alternative script organized around four dimensions: Mindful authority, Accountable power, Nurturing standards, and Purposeful stewardship. The plus sign matters because the model is not simply a list of leader competencies. It concerns direction: what forms of performance a leadership system pursues, protects, and is willing to sacrifice.

The article makes six contributions. First, it re-frames masculinity as an organizationally consequential script rather than a fixed identity category. Second, it explains why legacy masculine scripts remain sticky even when they generate exclusion, silence, burnout, and ethical drift. Third, it differentiates MAN+ from adjacent leadership frameworks by centring gendered leader legitimacy rather than only desirable leader traits. Fourth, it specifies

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mechanisms, propositions, and empirical pathways through which the model can be examined critically rather than celebrated normatively. Fifth, it theorizes boundary conditions, intersectional contingencies, and risks of managerial co-optation. Sixth, it clarifies that MAN+ is not offered to re-centre men or replace structural reform with therapeutic coaching; it is a counter-script whose value depends on whether it can alter the conditions under which authority is performed and recognized.

Two clarifications sharpen the argument. First, MAN+ is not a rehabilitation project for men as such, nor does it presume that harmful authority scripts are enacted only by men. It treats masculinity as an organizationally circulating code that can be performed, rewarded, or enforced across genders. Second, the framework is not offered as a soft behavioural layer to be placed on top of unchanged structures. Its analytic point is stronger: leadership reform remains partial when organizations seek better behaviours without changing the legitimacy regime that still makes domination, overwork, and emotional hardening look leader-like. In that sense, MAN+ is a theory of counter-scripting under unequal conditions of authority, not a therapeutic vocabulary for individual self-improvement.

That distinction matters for Q1-level theory work because it raises the threshold of what would count as support for the framework. MAN+ is only useful if it can explain phenomena that adjacent leadership theories systematically leave under-theorized: why admirable behaviours are recognized as mature authority in some bodies but as weakness, naivety, or lack of gravitas in others; why development programmes routinely fail against entrenched symbolic rewards; and why organizations can publicly endorse inclusion while still privately authorizing

highly gendered performances of toughness.

### **Why leadership theory needs a gendered account of legitimacy**

Treating masculinity as a script shifts attention away from identity essentialism and toward patterned expectation. A script is a learned sequence of meanings, performances, sanctions, and rewards that appears natural because it is repeatedly enacted and institutionally reinforced. Applied to leadership, the script metaphor asks a different question from the usual one. Instead of asking whether leaders are masculine, it asks what kinds of conduct are coded as leader-like and what those codes do inside organizations.

This move is consistent with foundational work on gendered organizations. Acker showed that organizations are built around abstract workers who are presented as gender-neutral yet implicitly modelled on masculinized assumptions about bodies, responsibilities, availability, and career continuity. Her later theory of inequality regimes sharpened the argument: inequalities are not incidental deviations from neutral structures but ongoing patterns produced through work practices, controls, interactions, and meaning systems. Leadership legitimacy sits inside those regimes. Who looks authoritative, whose ambition is celebrated, who can display emotion without penalty, and who is granted room for error are all filtered through organizationally gendered assumptions.

Connell and Messerschmidt's reformulation of hegemonic masculinity is also central because it demonstrates that masculinities are plural, relational, and hierarchical. Hegemonic masculinity does not describe the average man. It names the culturally dominant form that organizes legitimacy and

subordination among men and between men and women. In organizational settings, this matters because only a minority of actors may fully embody the dominant script, yet the script can still define the terms of recognition for everyone else. The result is not merely unequal experience; it is unequal intelligibility. Some people are instantly legible as leaders, while others must translate themselves into an inherited standard.

Role congruity theory adds another layer. Eagly and Karau argue that evaluations of leaders are filtered through culturally shared expectations about who is supposed to occupy authority and how they are supposed to behave. Leadership is therefore assessed not only in terms of outcomes, but in terms of fit between gendered expectations and organizationally valued conduct. This helps explain why identical behaviours are often interpreted differently depending on who enacts them. Decisiveness may read as confidence in one body and abrasiveness in another; care may read as maturity in one body and softness or lack of ambition in another.

The ideal-worker norm extends this insight. The ideal worker is imagined as endlessly available, unencumbered by care, physically and temporally elastic, and oriented toward work devotion as a primary moral good. Although often presented as a neutral standard of commitment, the ideal worker remains historically masculine in its design and effects. Recent work suggests that norm shifts toward

inclusive worker models are possible, but only when organizations alter not merely discourse but the visible reward structures through which devotion, responsiveness, and seriousness are judged. When leadership is defined through the ideal-worker imaginary, it becomes easy to confuse depletion with dedication and care with weakness.

Script language is analytically useful for another reason: it enables critique without assuming that all men enact the same norms or that non-men are unaffected by them. Scripts can be distributed across genders. A woman can enforce a masculinity contest script. A man can resist it. The critical issue is not who biologically carries the script, but how the script governs leader legitimacy and organizational life. For a theory paper, that distinction matters because it keeps the construct focused on patterned organizational meaning rather than moralized individual blame.

The theoretical problem, then, is not simply that some leaders behave badly. It is that organizations keep authorizing certain ways of doing authority even when leadership science offers better accounts of what supports learning, voice, and sustainable performance. To solve that problem, leadership theory must say more about how legitimacy is generated, how it is reproduced in everyday evaluation, and how alternative scripts might become credible rather than merely admirable.

Table 1. Legacy masculinity scripts and MAN+ counter-scripting

Legacy script	How it appears in leadership	Organizational cost	MAN+ counter-script
Invulnerability	Authority is associated with emotional containment, certainty, and visible immunity from need or doubt.	Reduced psychological safety, hidden error, brittle decision-making.	Mindful authority: regulated presence, reflective pause, emotional literacy, and listening without status loss.
Dominance	Power is performed through interruption, intimidation, speed, and unilateral control.	Voice suppression, defensive conformity, toxic conflict, and reputational risk.	Accountable power: answerability, repair, fair standards, and truth-telling without humiliation.

Work devotion as moral worth	Endless availability and sacrifice are treated as proof of seriousness and commitment.	Burnout, exclusion of carers, ideal-worker bias, and short-term heroics.	Nurturing standards: developmental challenge, workload stewardship, and high expectations without depletion.
Immunity from repair	Leaders are expected to move on quickly and not revisit harm or error once results are delivered.	Ethical drift, normalization of misconduct, cynicism, and double standards.	Accountable power plus purposeful stewardship: repair, closure of commitments, and integrity under pressure.
Performance at any cost	Targets override meaning, dignity, and long-term sustainability.	Mission washing, turnover, fear, and erosion of trust.	Purposeful stewardship: value-linked direction, ethical red lines, and sustainable performance.

**Why legacy masculine scripts persist and what they cost** manage identity to survive within them.

Legacy masculine leadership scripts persist partly because they can generate visible short-term outcomes. They can speed decisions, intensify effort, produce vivid symbolic performances of toughness, and create the impression of control. In high-pressure contexts, such performances are often mistaken for effectiveness itself. Their deeper power, however, lies in a different mechanism: they convert contingent cultural assumptions into organizational common sense. Once this happens, alternatives such as reflective decision-making, developmental care, or explicit repair appear optional, sentimental, or professionally suspect.

Scholarship on masculinity contest culture helps explain the process. Berdahl and colleagues argue that work becomes a masculinity contest when status and power are linked to displays of strength, stamina, domination, and work devotion. Glick and colleagues demonstrated that such cultures can be measured. Matos, O'Neill, and Lei linked them to abusive leadership, while Koc, Gulseren, and Lyubikh showed that masculinity contest cultures can reduce organizational citizenship by weakening organizational identification. More recent research indicates that these cultures also encourage self-group distancing among women, which matters because it shows that gendered authority systems do not merely exclude; they can reshape how people

The costs are not only interpersonal. At team level, legacy scripts narrow voice climates because speaking up becomes risky when authority is attached to certainty, speed, and face-saving. At organizational level, they distort selection and promotion because the people most legible as leaders are those who can perform composure, dominance, and sacrifice in culturally recognizable ways. At institutional level, they contribute to the persistence of inequality regimes by making harmful standards appear meritocratic.

These costs are also mutually reinforcing. Psychological safety declines when people expect ridicule or retaliation for dissent. Lower safety reduces learning and increases hidden error. Hidden error increases pressure, which in turn invites more domination and certainty performances from leaders. The system thus becomes self-sealing: the behaviours that create fear are then justified by the chaos that fear helps produce. Burnout, rework, and cynicism follow.

A crucial point for theory-building is that these costs are often misread as unfortunate side effects of otherwise necessary strength. MAN+ rejects that framing. It treats human depletion, silence, and exclusion not as tolerable collateral damage, but as evidence that the governing script of leadership is

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itself faulty. This is why the problem cannot be solved simply by telling leaders to be nicer. What must change is the cultural code that defines what authoritative leadership looks like in the first place.

### **Why adjacent leadership theories are not enough**

A sceptical reader may reasonably ask whether an additional leadership framework is necessary. Why not rely on transformational, authentic, servant, or ethical leadership? These traditions have each made important contributions, and MAN+ draws from them. However, none of them sufficiently centres a question that gender-and-organization scholarship treats as fundamental: under what gendered conditions are leader behaviours recognized as legitimate in the first place?

Transformational leadership explains how leaders mobilize meaning, aspiration, and change. Authentic leadership foregrounds self-awareness and relational transparency. Servant leadership emphasizes service and follower development. Ethical leadership addresses fairness, role modelling, and normative restraint. Yet these models usually assume that the qualities they valorize can travel into organizational life without being refracted by historically masculine norms of authority. They help explain what good leaders do, but they often say less about why the same behaviours are rewarded in some actors and penalized in others, or why high-performing organizations continue to valorize scripts that directly contradict their stated values.

MAN+ adds theoretical value by centring gendered recognition. It asks how authority becomes legible, whose behaviours are coded as credible, and what organizational systems stabilize those judgements. In this sense, the framework is less a competitor to

adjacent leadership theories than a corrective lens. It identifies the gendered legitimacy conditions under which those theories are enacted, constrained, distorted, or selectively granted.

MAN+ also differs in its object of critique. Many leadership theories focus on desirable traits or behaviours in relatively decontextualized form. MAN+ instead targets a cultural operating system: the script through which organizations authorize dominance, emotional suppression, overwork, and impunity. That shift matters because a leader can score highly on inspirational communication or moral aspiration while still reproducing a masculinity contest culture. Without a script-level account, leadership development risks treating symptoms while leaving the reward system intact.

Finally, MAN+ explicitly theorizes co-optation. A framework can sound progressive while becoming a new branding layer for unchanged power relations. By foregrounding risks of symbolic adoption, emotional labour redistribution, neo-paternalism, and decoupling between rhetoric and reward, MAN+ attempts to remain accountable to feminist critique rather than merely borrowing its vocabulary.

The discriminant value of MAN+ can therefore be stated precisely. Transformational, authentic, servant, and ethical leadership theories primarily specify what leaders ought to do or display. MAN+ specifies the gendered regime under which those same behaviours acquire, lose, or never receive the status of credible authority. Its theoretical surplus lies not in inventing new virtues, but in relocating familiar virtues inside unequal conditions of recognizability. This is why the framework can explain both failure and backlash. A leader may enact

transparency, care, or repair competently and still be judged as insufficiently leader-like if the surrounding legitimacy code continues to privilege hardness, bodily stamina, emotional restriction, and whiteness, classed polish, or uninterrupted work devotion as the proper appearance of authority.

Seen this way, MAN+ is not merely additive. It makes a different causal claim. The problem is not

only that some organizations lack care or ethics. The problem is that evaluative regimes sort the same behaviours differently depending on who performs them, under what symbolic conditions, and with what support from reward structures. A theory that omits that sorting mechanism risks overstating the transportability of leadership virtues across bodies, contexts, and inequality regimes.

Table 2. How MAN+ differs from adjacent leadership frameworks

Framework	Primary contribution	What it explains well	What MAN+ adds
Transformational leadership	Vision, inspiration, and change-oriented influence.	Mobilization, meaning, and follower motivation.	How inspiration and decisiveness are themselves filtered through gendered legitimacy codes and masculinity contest norms.
Authentic leadership	Self-awareness, congruence, and relational transparency.	Trust linked to perceived sincerity and integrity.	Why vulnerability and transparency are not equally legible as strength across actors and organizational contexts.
Servant leadership	Service, humility, and follower growth.	Developmental support and leader orientation to others.	How care is frequently devalued as non-leader-like in gendered organizations unless legitimacy codes shift.
Ethical leadership	Fairness, role modelling, and normative restraint.	Misconduct prevention, justice perceptions, and integrity.	How impunity and accountability are culturally patterned through masculine expectations of status protection.
Psychological safety and voice scholarship	Conditions for speaking up, learning, and error reporting.	Team climates that support candour and experimentation.	Why some authority performances systematically produce fear and why counter-scripting is needed at the level of leadership legitimacy.

### The MAN+ framework

MAN+ is proposed as a counter-script rather than a masculinity ideal. It does not ask leaders to become softer, less ambitious, or less decisive. It asks organizations to re-code what counts as credible strength. The four dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Mindful authority without accountability risks becoming self-aware image management. Accountability without nurturance can slide into procedural severity. Nurturance without purpose can become under-bounded care. Purpose without mindfulness can become charismatic overreach. The model therefore works as a patterned configu-

ration rather than a menu.

The four dimensions are named in ways that retain the mnemonic force of MAN+ while shifting its normative centre. Each dimension is described below in terms of definition, mechanisms, observable leader practices, and failure modes. The recurring question is not merely whether a behaviour is admirable, but whether it alters the legitimacy code through which authority is recognized.

### Mindful authority

Mindful authority refers to regulated presence un-

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der pressure. It combines emotional literacy, reflective pause, attentive listening, and cognitive discipline. The point is not therapeutic calmness for its own sake. The point is that leadership conducted through speed, defensiveness, and status panic narrows organizational intelligence. Mindful authority enlarges it by making uncertainty discussable without converting it into weakness.

Mechanistically, mindful authority weakens the equation between strength and invulnerability. It changes what subordinates infer from leader composure. Instead of reading restraint as emotional distance or face-saving, followers encounter restraint as openness to information, revision, and dissent. This matters for psychological safety because people are more willing to raise risk when leaders do not treat uncertainty as a threat to status.

Observable practices include pausing before escalatory responses, distinguishing facts from interpretations, naming tension without dramatization, inviting contradiction, paraphrasing rather than interrupting, and making room for not-knowing in decision processes. These practices are small, but their symbolic significance is large because they make authority less brittle and more absorptive.

Failure modes also require attention. Mindful authority can be simulated as performative calm while domination simply becomes more polished. It can also be reduced to self-regulation in ways that privatize structural problems. For MAN+, mindfulness counts only when it changes the relational and informational conditions of authority, not when it merely improves elite composure.

### **Accountable power**

Accountable power names a shift from impunity to

answerability. It redefines strength as the capacity to own impact, make repair visible, close loops, and accept that authority does not exempt one from correction. In many legacy scripts, rapid continuation after harm is treated as executive toughness. MAN+ rejects that equation. Authority that cannot return to harm, name it, and alter conduct is not mature power; it is status protection.

Mechanistically, accountable power interrupts two reinforcing dynamics. The first is fear-based silence, because subordinates learn that truth can reach power without automatically provoking humiliation or retaliation. The second is ethical drift, because decisions are tied to explicit standards of repair rather than only to targets or appearances. Repair therefore becomes not a sentimental add-on, but a governance practice that converts values into observable accountability.

Observable practices include public ownership of mistakes, time-bound repair commitments, behavioural rather than identity-based feedback, closure of commitments, and explicit protection of truth-tellers. These practices matter because they redistribute the moral burden of error. Followers no longer carry the entire cost of speaking up while leaders preserve face.

Accountable power can, however, be distorted. It can become procedural theatre if apologies are issued without changed behaviour. It can also become punitive if accountability is applied downward while senior actors remain insulated. MAN+ therefore treats fairness of application as a constitutive feature of accountability, not a secondary implementation detail.

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## Nurturing standards

Nurturing standards is perhaps the most easily misunderstood dimension because care is often read as a dilution of performance. MAN+ defines nurturance differently. It means holding high standards while actively investing in the conditions that allow people to meet them without avoidable depletion or humiliation. It combines developmental feedback, inclusion, workload stewardship, and respect for human limits with a refusal to lower the bar.

Mechanistically, nurturing standards decouples competence from hardness. It challenges the inherited assumption that pressure proves seriousness and that care undermines merit. This matters in gendered organizations because developmental labour is often feminized, invisibilized, or extracted without prestige. By recoding care as a leadership standard rather than a feminine surplus, MAN+ aims to change not only leader conduct but the status value attached to relational labour.

Observable practices include specific and growth-oriented feedback, explicit workload review, refusal to reward heroics that depend on chronic overreach, inclusive meeting design, recognition of contribution beyond self-promotion, and deliberate developmental sponsorship. When sustained over time, such practices alter not only morale but the normative link between authority and domination.

Failure modes are real. Nurturing standards can slide into paternalism if leaders infantilize followers under the sign of care. It can also reproduce gendered inequity if women and marginalized leaders are expected to supply more care while dominant actors continue to harvest prestige from hardness. For this reason, nurturance must be institutionalized as a shared leadership expectation, not

allocated as a discretionary burden to those already marked as relational.

## Purposeful stewardship

Purposeful stewardship introduces direction and moral horizon. The plus sign in MAN+ matters because leadership is never only about competency; it is also about what an organization treats as worth pursuing, protecting, and refusing. Purposeful stewardship links performance to meaning, ethical boundaries, temporal horizon, and collective consequence. It asks whether winning under present conditions would still count as success if it normalizes silence, depletion, or indignity.

Mechanistically, purposeful stewardship weakens short-termism and redefines what counts as legitimate sacrifice. It makes leaders articulate not only what must be achieved but what must not be traded away in order to achieve it. This is especially important in contexts where masculinity contest and ideal-worker norms encourage work devotion as moral worth. Purposeful stewardship restores evaluative criteria that exceed visible output.

Observable practices include explicit explanation of the 'why' behind difficult decisions, articulation of ethical red lines, refusal to convert crisis into permanent overwork, linkage of targets to human and organizational consequences, and narrative work that ties identity to responsible impact rather than heroic endurance.

Failure modes again matter. Purpose can become rhetoric without redesign, or a tool for extracting discretionary effort under a moralized banner. MAN+ therefore treats stewardship as credible only when purpose is reflected in incentives, workload design, promotion criteria, and responses to

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misconduct. Without those alignments, purpose remains decorative.

### **Dynamic complementarities and script change**

The dimensions should not be treated as independent virtues. Their theoretical force lies in how they alter one another. Mindful authority creates informational conditions for accountable power because leaders can hear challenge without immediate status collapse. Accountable power protects nurturing standards from becoming indulgent because care is paired with responsibility and closure. Nurturing standards stabilizes purposeful stewardship by preventing meaning from being pursued through depletion. Purposeful stewardship gives the other dimensions direction, ensuring that self-regulation, repair, and care are not pursued as image management but as conditions of legitimate and sustainable organizing.

This interdependence matters empirically because organizations rarely change through isolated behaviours. Script change occurs when multiple cues align: what leaders say, how they decide, whom they reward, what they tolerate under pressure, and how they respond after harm. MAN+ therefore predicts greater effects when its dimensions are enacted as a patterned configuration and embedded in formal systems, rather than presented as optional behavioural tips.

### **Developmental activation: the 4A logic**

MAN+ identifies the counter-script; the 4A logic explains how that counter-script becomes learnable and repeatable. The four terms are Learning, Attitude, Soul, and Action. Within this article, they are not introduced as abstract values but as developmental stages through which script change becomes organizationally credible.

Learning concerns script visibility. Leaders and organizations must first identify the inherited norms they routinely mistake for competence: the fast answer instead of reflective judgement, the heroic sacrifice instead of workload dysfunction, the intimidating presence instead of legitimate authority. Without this stage, harmful practices remain invisible because they are confused with professionalism.

Attitude concerns motivational reorientation. Counter-scripting requires leaders to shift from defensiveness to openness, from status preservation to responsibility, and from control for its own sake to disciplined relational authority. This stage matters because many organizations endorse new values rhetorically while rewarding old behaviours materially. Attitude names the internal and cultural willingness to interrupt that contradiction.

Soul is used here in an operational sense: coherence, dignity, care, truth, and purpose. The term is intentionally demanding. It resists purely instrumental uptake by asking whether behavioural change is connected to a different moral orientation toward persons and organizational life. Soul does not replace structure, but it helps prevent counter-scripting from becoming a clever new language for old domination.

Action translates the counter-script into recurring practices, rituals, and systems: meeting design, repair routines, promotion criteria, workload review, leader assessment, and responses to misconduct. Action is decisive because scripts are sustained through repetition. If organizations want a different legitimacy code, they need visible, repeated, and rewarded enactments of that code.

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## Mechanisms, propositions, and empirical agenda

### Discriminant tests and routes to falsification

A stronger empirical agenda must do more than show that MAN+ correlates with desirable outcomes. It must establish discriminant validity against adjacent frameworks and demonstrate where the model fails. One route is comparative modelling: researchers can test whether MAN+ predicts psychological safety, accountability climate, voice, or burnout beyond authentic, ethical, servant, and transformational leadership once masculinity contest culture and ideal-worker norms are included in the design. If the explanatory gain disappears entirely once those constructs are entered, the distinctiveness claim weakens. If it persists, the case for MAN+ becomes materially stronger.

A second route concerns recognizability asymmetries. Experimental and mixed-method designs should test whether identical MAN+ enactments are differently interpreted depending on leader gender, race, class markers, sexuality, age, disability, or seniority. This is a crucial falsification point. If mindful authority, accountable power, nurturing standards, and purposeful stewardship are interpreted as equally leader-like across social locations, then the journal-facing claim about unequal conditions of authority is overstated. But if recognizability varies systematically by body and context, then the framework's central contribution is supported: leadership legitimacy is not a neutral stage on which good behaviour simply appears and succeeds.

A third route is longitudinal and multilevel. Script change should be examined not only at the individual leader level but across teams, units, and promotion systems. The strongest test would ask whether

organizations that institutionalize MAN+ through reward systems, meeting norms, repair practices, workload governance, and promotion criteria show stronger shifts than organizations that merely train leaders in the language of empathy or accountability. Such designs would help distinguish substantive counter-scripting from symbolic adoption.

A theory paper aimed at a demanding journal must do more than name desirable values. It must identify mechanisms through which the proposed framework might work, specify moderators and failure conditions, and show how the argument could be challenged empirically. MAN+ rests on five core mechanisms.

First, legitimacy re-coding: leader behaviours previously read as softness, delay, or unnecessary relationality may become legible as strength when the evaluative frame changes. Second, status threat reduction: by decoupling authority from domination and invulnerability, MAN+ reduces the need to perform certainty or hardness to preserve standing. Third, voice activation: when authority becomes less punitive and more answerable, people are more likely to raise concerns and ideas. Fourth, care revaluation: developmental and relational labour gains prestige rather than being coded as feminine surplus. Fifth, temporal rebalancing: purposeful stewardship weakens short-term output logics that normalize depletion and ethical compromise.

These mechanisms imply both direct and conditional effects. MAN+ is likely to matter more where organizations already rely heavily on leadership symbolism, where performance pressure is intense, and where legitimacy cues are highly visible. It may matter less, or differently, where formal rules are strong but informal norms remain un-

changed. It may also generate backlash when dominant actors experience counter-scripting as status loss rather than institutional repair.

Table 3. Propositions, mechanisms, and illustrative empirical indicators

Proposition	Theoretical expectation	Core mechanism	Illustrative indicators
P1	The stronger the masculinity contest culture, the more leadership legitimacy will be granted to invulnerability, dominance, and ideal-worker performances.	Normalization of gendered authority scripts.	Masculinity contest culture scales; leader ideal ratings; interview data on executive presence.
P2	Mindful authority will weaken the association between status threat and voice suppression.	Status threat reduction and psychological safety.	Psychological safety scales; meeting observations; interruption and speaking-time patterns.
P3	Accountable power will weaken the relationship between leader error and follower silence by increasing perceived repair credibility.	Repair as governance.	Fairness perceptions; incident reporting; follow-through on commitments; climate for speaking up.
P4	Nurturing standards will weaken the link between workload pressure and burnout by re-valuing developmental and relational leadership work.	Care re-valuation and workload stewardship.	Burnout measures; engagement; turnover intention; workload review practices.
P5	Purposeful stewardship will weaken the relationship between short-term pressure and ethical drift.	Temporal rebalancing and ethical boundary clarity.	Ethical climate measures; misconduct incidents; qualitative accounts of trade-off reasoning.
P6	The effect of MAN+ will be stronger when promotion, reward, and workload systems are aligned with the counter-script.	System reinforcement.	Promotion criteria; performance evaluation rubrics; policy-practice congruence.
P7	Intersectional penalties will moderate the benefits of MAN+ because some actors will still face sanctions for behaviours newly framed as legitimate.	Unequal recognizability of authority.	Differences by gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, age; experimental vignette studies.
P8	Symbolic adoption of MAN+ without changes to rewards and sanctions will produce decoupling rather than substantive legitimacy re-coding.	Managerial co-optation.	Discourse-practice gaps; employee cynicism; discrepancy between value statements and observed leader behaviour.

The propositions invite multiple methods. Survey organizations narrate strength, sacrifice, and credibility in promotion and crisis. Comparative case studies can examine whether policy shifts around workload, care, and misconduct actually change the legitimacy code rather than merely the official discourse. Experimental vignette studies can manipulate leader gender, race, class markers, and script enactment to examine whether MAN+ behaviours are equally legible as strong authority across bodies and contexts. Ethnographic work can study how organizations narrate strength, sacrifice, and credibility in promotion and crisis. Comparative case studies can examine whether policy shifts around workload, care, and misconduct actually change the legitimacy code rather than merely the official discourse. Disconfirming cases should be treated as theoretically productive rather than embarrassing. A

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MAN+ intervention might improve employee affect while leaving promotion logics intact. It might reduce open hostility while increasing demands for hidden emotional labour. It might even raise legitimacy for dominant men who adopt reflective language while leaving women and marginalized leaders exposed to stricter standards of proof. These are not implementation footnotes. They are part of the model's risk architecture and should be measured as seriously as the intended benefits.

Equally important are disconfirming possibilities. MAN+ may fail when leaders enact the script individually but the organization continues to reward domination, overwork, and face-saving. It may also fail when followers interpret mindful or nurturing conduct through deeply sedimented norms that still code hardness as competence. These possibilities are not peripheral. They are central to evaluating whether counter-scripting can alter organizational life or whether it remains trapped at the level of aspiration.

### **Boundary conditions, intersectional cautions, and paradoxes**

A serious theory paper must specify where its own argument may be limited. The first boundary condition concerns context. In militarized, hyper-competitive, or crisis-driven environments, legacy scripts may enjoy heightened legitimacy because they resonate with urgency, danger, and symbolic expectations of toughness. MAN+ is not irrelevant in such settings, but the pathway to legitimacy recoding may be steeper and more contested.

The second boundary condition concerns intersectionality. Even if organizations begin to value mindful, accountable, nurturing, and purpose-oriented leadership, those behaviours may not be

interpreted equally across actors. Racialized, classed, queer, disabled, or older bodies may still be judged through additional stereotypes that complicate recognizability. A white senior man may gain legitimacy for reflective restraint where a younger woman of colour is read as lacking decisiveness; a gay male leader may be compelled to manage femininity accusations even while enacting the same script. MAN+ therefore cannot presume equal uptake. It must be studied as a framework whose enactment remains mediated by intersecting inequalities.

Intersectionality is therefore not an optional moderator appended after the main theory has been built; it is a test of whether the theory has actually understood legitimacy. Crenshaw's original intervention reminds us that social positions are not simply additive, and scholarship on leadership evaluation shows that authority judgements are shaped by the convergence of gender with race and other status cues. For MAN+, this means that recognizability cannot be inferred from script enactment alone. The same mindful pause may read as gravitas in a senior white man, hesitation in a younger woman, or lack of fit in a racialized leader whose authority is already precarious before any behaviour is observed.

This point also sharpens the article's political discipline. A framework that ignores unequal recognizability risks implying that marginalized actors merely need better behavioural scripts in order to succeed. MAN+ rejects that implication. Counter-scripting must be evaluated against the possibility that organizations continue to reward dominant embodiments of authority even while praising inclusive behaviour in principle. Where that occurs, the framework's practical implication is not simply

more coaching; it is redesign of evaluation, sponsorship, succession, and workload systems so that alternative authority performances are not structurally under-recognized.

A third caution concerns emotional labour. There is a real risk that organizations will celebrate MAN+ while informally allocating its most relational demands to women and marginalized leaders.

If mindful listening, repair, and nurturance are expected primarily from those already stereotyped as caring, the framework could reproduce the very asymmetries it seeks to interrupt. Institutionalization is therefore crucial: the counter-script must be encoded as a leadership expectation for everyone, especially dominant actors whose legitimacy has historically been least dependent on relational competence.

A fourth caution concerns neo-paternalism. Care can be mobilized in controlling ways. Leaders may

cloak unilateral decisions in the language of concern, or use purpose narratives to extract more discretionary effort from already over-burdened employees. For this reason, MAN+ should not be judged by tone alone. The question is whether followers experience greater agency, dignity, candour, and sustainable workload, not simply kinder rhetoric.

A fifth caution is political. Feminist organization theory has repeatedly warned against managerial solutions that individualize structural injustice. MAN+ does not eliminate the need for pay equity, promotion transparency, anti-harassment systems, parental support, workload redesign, or governance reform. At best, it complements such interventions by targeting the legitimacy code through which they are either reinforced or undermined. At worst, if adopted in isolation, it could become another way of depoliticizing inequality under the language of culture change.

Table 4. Boundary conditions and failure modes

Risk or boundary condition	Why it matters	Implication for MAN+ research and implementation
High-pressure or militarized contexts	Toughness scripts may be culturally intensified and symbolically rewarded.	Study sector-specific legitimacy cues and avoid assuming equal receptivity to counter-scripting.
Intersectional asymmetry	The same MAN+ behaviour may be legitimized in some actors and penalized in others.	Test moderation by gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, age, and seniority.
Relational labour dumping	Care, listening, and repair may be informally assigned to women or marginalized leaders.	Institutionalize MAN+ as a universal leadership expectation tied to assessment and reward.
Symbolic adoption	Organizations may embrace the language of MAN+ without changing incentives or sanctions.	Measure discourse-practice gaps and employee cynicism as part of implementation studies.
Neo-paternalism	Care and purpose rhetoric can become softer forms of control.	Assess follower agency, not just leader intention or communicative tone.

### Discussion and implications

The theoretical contribution of MAN+ is not that it has discovered new virtues. Its contribution is to reposition familiar virtues inside a gendered theory of leadership legitimacy. This repositioning matters because organizations do not simply evaluate what leaders do; they evaluate whether what leaders do

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looks like authority according to historically sedimented norms. By centring that problem, MAN+ helps explain why leadership development and culture programmes so often fail to dislodge patterns of fear, overwork, and impunity even when organizations endorse ethics, inclusion, and well-being.

The article also contributes to feminist organization theory by offering a script-level vocabulary that can travel into leadership studies without surrendering political critique. Rather than presenting gender as an optional demographic layer, MAN+ treats gendered legitimacy as constitutive of authority itself. This allows the paper to speak to leadership scholars who may otherwise regard gender critique as adjacent to, rather than central to, their field. At the same time, the framework remains accountable to feminist concerns by specifying co-optation risks, structural limits, and unequal conditions of enactment.

For research, the central implication is that leader effectiveness cannot be fully understood without studying the social recognizability of authority. Scholars should examine not only whether leaders behave ethically, transparently, or supportively, but whether those behaviours are granted the status of strength, maturity, and seriousness across organizational contexts and social locations. This shifts attention from leader traits alone toward evaluative regimes, symbolic rewards, and inequality structures.

For practice, the implication is equally demanding. Organizations cannot simply train individual leaders in empathy or accountability and assume script change will follow. They must alter promotion criteria, meeting norms, performance metrics, workload expectations, responses to misconduct, and the

symbolic cues through which leadership excellence is publicly recognized. Counter-scripting fails when formal development programmes celebrate behaviours that the informal reward system quietly punishes.

A final implication concerns legitimacy itself. In gendered organizations, legitimacy is often treated as though it naturally adheres to certain bodies and performances. MAN+ insists that legitimacy is organized, rehearsed, and revisable. That claim is modest enough to remain empirical yet ambitious enough to matter politically. If the terms on which authority is recognized can change, then the human costs currently accepted as the price of leadership are neither natural nor inevitable.

A demanding reader may still ask whether MAN+ names a genuine conceptual advance or a strategically assembled synthesis. The answer should remain empirical and argumentative rather than rhetorical. If future studies show that legitimacy is not differentially granted across social locations, that masculinity contest and ideal-worker norms do not materially condition the uptake of leader behaviours, or that MAN+ adds no explanatory leverage beyond adjacent leadership theories, then the framework should be revised or abandoned. The article's ambition is therefore not self-sealing novelty, but a sharper problem statement: authority is organized through gendered conditions of legibility, and leadership theory must face that fact directly if it wants to explain why good practices remain so hard to institutionalize.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that many organizations continue to authorize leadership through a legacy masculine script that equates strength with invul-

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nerability, dominance, overwork, emotional restriction, and exemption from repair. The problem with that script is not merely moral discomfort. It is organizational dysfunction: lower voice, brittle learning, ethical drift, burnout, exclusion, and the reproduction of inequality under the sign of merit.

MAN+ was proposed as a counter-script composed of Mindful authority, Accountable power, Nurturing standards, and Purposeful stewardship. Its distinctive contribution lies not in celebrating desirable leader qualities, but in theorizing how those qualities are filtered through gendered legitimacy conditions under which authority becomes recognizable, rewarded, or discounted. By integrating feminist organization theory with leadership research, the article offers a framework for examining how organizations might de-authorize harmful norms of strength without romanticizing care, privatizing structural problems, or confusing symbolic niceness with institutional change.

The claim is deliberately disciplined. MAN+ does not solve gender inequality, nor does it presume that counter-scripting will be easy under entrenched inequality regimes. It argues, rather, that leadership reform remains incomplete when it ignores the gendered conditions of authority under which reforms must operate. If legitimacy is organized, rehearsed, and differentially granted, then changing leadership requires more than new competencies. It requires a contest over the very code through which seriousness, strength, and leaderlikeness are recognized at work.

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