

From Good to Great: A Conceptual Integration of Level 5 and Transformational Leadership Theories

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Abstract: The purpose of this conceptual paper is to review and propose a conceptual framework that could be used to determine the key factors that influence organizational culture of trust and discipline and sustainable organizational excellence (transition from good to great). Several papers were reviewed in order to formulate the conceptual framework. The review of past literature indicated that to enhance sustainable organizational excellence can be achieved indirectly by improving personal humility, professional will and by cultivating transformational leadership behaviour among the workforce as well as among the leadership of any organization. This means leaders with professional will and personal humility would enable them to successfully transit from good to great. This is because personal humility and professional will play an important role in cultivating the organizational culture of discipline and trust. The conceptual analysis showed that organizational culture that prevails in trust and discipline fosters sustainable organizational excellence that results organization move from a good organization to a great organization. The implication of the review is discussed in the conclusion part of the paper.

Keywords: Good to Great, Personal humility, Professional will, Transformational leadership, Sustainable organizational excellence, Organizational culture, trust and discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Leadership remains one of the most researched and evolving constructs in management and organizational behavior because it lies at the heart of organizational success and transformation. (Madanchian *et al.*, 2016; Early, 2017; Hunt and Fedynich 2019; Gollapudi, 2025). Early leadership theories such as the trait, transactional, and situational models emphasized structure, control, and performance outcomes. While these frameworks contributed to efficiency, they often overlooked the deeper human dimensions of leadership, purpose, vision, and moral influence. In contrast, modern organizations face dynamic environments that demand leaders who can inspire commitment, foster empowerment, and sustain long-term excellence rather than merely manage compliance. Jim Collins' Good to Great framework (2001), brought renewed attention to this idea through the concept of Level 5 Leadership, which represents the pinnacle of leadership maturity, a fusion of personal humility and professional will that drives organizations from mediocrity to enduring greatness. Complementing this is the Transformational Leadership Theory advanced by Burns (1978) and later refined by Bass (1985), which emphasizes motivation through vision, shared values, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Together, these perspectives

illustrate the ongoing shift from transactional performance management to purpose-driven, character-based leadership capable of creating lasting impact (Ratnayake, 2025).

In today's rapidly changing environment, leadership effectiveness has become increasingly challenged by globalization, (Perez, 2017; Litz, 2011; Mäkelä, *et al.*, 2020), technological disruption, (Sunarmo, *et al.*, 2023; Wijaya, 2024), ethical crises, (Coldwell, 2017) and organizational fatigue. (Connaughton, & Hassinger, 2007). According to Wijaya, (2024), the accelerated pace of digital transformation has redefined communication, teamwork, and decision-making, requiring leaders who are agile, tech-savvy, and emotionally intelligent. Meanwhile, Mäkelä, *et al.*, (2020) believes that globalization has diversified workforces and expanded cross-cultural collaboration, demanding inclusive and adaptable leadership styles. Simultaneously, the world has witnessed growing ethical lapses and leadership scandals, highlighting the urgent need for value-based, accountable, and transparent leadership. Research has shown a global shift from output-driven leadership to purpose-centered and service-oriented approaches, rooted in authenticity, humility, and emotional intelligence. Scholars such as Bass (1999) and Avolio & Gardner (2005) emphasize that authentic and transformational leadership fosters trust, engagement, and long-term

organizational sustainability. Despite these shifts, Jim Collins' Good to Great (2001) framework remains largely corporate focused, creating an opportunity to explore how its principles, particularly the Level 5 Leadership, can be adapted and applied within public, educational, and community leadership contexts, where moral integrity and cultural transformation are equally essential (Suthari et al., 2025).

While Jim Collins' Good to Great framework has inspired thousands of organizations worldwide, empirical research seldom connects Level 5 Leadership with transformational leadership theory, particularly in developing or public-sector contexts. Collins' (2001) seminal work was grounded in corporate case studies from large American companies, which limits its applicability to smaller, value-driven institutions such as schools, hospitals, and government agencies. With all these, there still remains a theoretical and practical gap in understanding how personal traits of humility and willpower translate into transformational behaviors that sustain organizational greatness over time. Addressing this gap is crucial, especially in emerging and public-sector contexts like the Maldives, where leadership effectiveness depends not merely on achieving operational success but on cultivating cultures of integrity, innovation, and long-term institutional excellence.

Problem Statement

Despite decades of leadership research, many organizations continue to struggle with sustaining excellence beyond short-term performance gains. Traditional leadership approaches often focus on administrative control, performance management, and compliance, but fail to inspire long-term cultural transformation. Jim Collins' (2001) Good to Great framework provided valuable insights into how certain companies achieve enduring success through Level 5 Leadership, characterized by humility and professional will. However, its application has remained primarily within corporate contexts, leaving a theoretical and practical gap in understanding how these principles translate to public and developmental settings, such as education and governance in small-island nations like the Maldives. At the same time, Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) offers a powerful model for inspiring change, motivation, and collective purpose, yet it does not explicitly account for the deeper personal attributes of humility and discipline emphasized in Level 5 Leadership.

Khanin (2007), concludes that Bass's model, while valuable for research and measurement, risks diluting the moral, philosophical depth of Burns' transforming leadership by prioritizing performance and efficiency. Consequently, there is limited conceptual understanding of how these two leadership paradigms intersect to produce leaders capable of sustaining innovation, ethical integrity, and organizational greatness in complex and resource-constrained environments. This study addresses that gap by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that unites Level 5 and transformational leadership theories to explain the transition from "good" to "great" leadership.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this conceptual paper is to develop an integrated framework that explains how the traits of Level 5 Leadership interact with the behaviors of Transformational Leadership to create sustainable organizational excellence.

Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- Examine the theoretical foundations and key principles of Level 5 Leadership and Transformational Leadership within existing leadership literature.
- Identify the conceptual intersections between humility and will (from Level 5 Leadership) and transformational processes such as vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration.
- Develop a conceptual framework that integrates Level 5 and Transformational Leadership theories to explain the transition from "good" to "great" leadership.
- Propose theoretical propositions for future empirical research to test the relationship between personal leadership traits, transformational behaviors, and sustainable organizational excellence.
- Contextualize the proposed framework for applicability within public-sector and educational institutions in the Maldivian context, emphasizing innovation, ethical integrity, and long-term performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Key Concepts

Leadership theory has evolved through multiple paradigms, each emphasizing different dimensions of influence, motivation, and organizational impact. "Good to Great" leadership centres on what Collins termed "Level 5 Leadership", a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will (Riaz, 2025). This leadership model challenges conventional wisdom about what

makes great leaders, suggesting that the most effective transformational leaders are often those who display modesty, channel ambition toward the company rather than themselves, and build enduring greatness through systematic discipline rather than dramatic strokes of genius (Collins, 2009). These leaders prioritize organizational greatness over personal recognition, build enduring success through disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action, and always focus on “who” before “what”, ensuring the right people are on the team first (Pratikna and Gamayanto, 2017). Jim Collins’ (2001) Good to Great framework provides a practical yet profound lens for understanding how organizations move from mediocrity to sustained excellence. Central to this model is the concept of Level 5 Leadership, characterized by a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Collins also identifies complementary principles such as the Hedgehog Concept (clarity of purpose), Culture of Discipline (self-regulation and accountability), and Technology Accelerators (using technology strategically rather than reactively).

In contrast, Transformational Leadership Theory, introduced by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), emphasizes the leader’s ability to inspire, intellectually stimulate, and individually consider followers. Transformational leaders motivate beyond transactional exchanges by creating vision, fostering trust, and nurturing personal growth among team members. This model aligns with the psychological and emotional aspects of leadership, highlighting how purpose and inspiration drive commitment and change.

Similarly, Servant Leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1977), centers on the idea that the most effective leaders are those who serve first. It emphasizes humility, empathy, moral integrity, and the leader’s responsibility to empower others rather than dominate them. This perspective contributes to the ethical and humanistic foundation of leadership, aligning closely with the humility dimension of Level 5 Leadership.

Together, these frameworks reveal a progressive evolution of leadership thought, from authority-based to character-based, and from control-driven to value-driven leadership. The research of Jim Collins unveiled a remarkable consistent pattern wherein every single executive combined extreme personal humility with intense professional will to be called as “Level 5 Leader” (Brown, 2010). The duality - outwardly humble but inwardly

possessing an iron will that drives transformative results is demonstrated by Abraham Lincoln and CEO Colman Mockler illustrate this duality. This rare combination is essential for turning a good company into a truly great one. (Taylor and Mc Arthur, 2024) identified five key leadership qualities that exemplify this level of leadership: purpose before profits, connection before critical thinking, service before seniority, creativity before control and coaching for mastery.

Level 5 Leadership can thus be viewed as a synthesis of these paradigms, uniting the humility of Servant Leadership with the inspiration and vision of Transformational Leadership to create leaders who achieve enduring greatness beyond self-interest.

Critical Review of Underlying Theory

Comparing the cores, Collins’ Good to Great centers on Level 5 Leadership, a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will, and couples it with organizational mechanisms (First Who, Hedgehog, Culture of Discipline, Flywheel). Bass’ Transformational Leadership explains how leaders elevate followers through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership foregrounds service, humility, and moral stewardship, arguing that leadership legitimacy derives from meeting others’ needs. Conceptually, Collins overlaps with both: his Level 5 humility echoes Greenleaf’s servant ethic, while his relentless will and focus on building successors resonate with Bass’ emphasis on vision and follower development. The distinctive contribution of Collins is the organization of virtue, he links leader character to repeatable disciplines and systemic choices that compound into sustained performance.

Where each fall short on its own. Collins is often critiqued for being corporate centric and post-hoc (success cases reverse-engineered), with limited attention to follower psychology and cross-sector transferability. Transformational leadership, while rich at the leader follower level, can drift toward heroic leader bias and under specify the structural routines that make transformation durable beyond the leader. Servant leadership provides a compelling moral foundation, but critics note measurement ambiguity and weaker ties to hard performance outcomes in some contexts. Taken separately, each lens risks incompleteness: Collins under-theorizes follower dynamics; Bass under-specifies institutionalization; Greenleaf under-

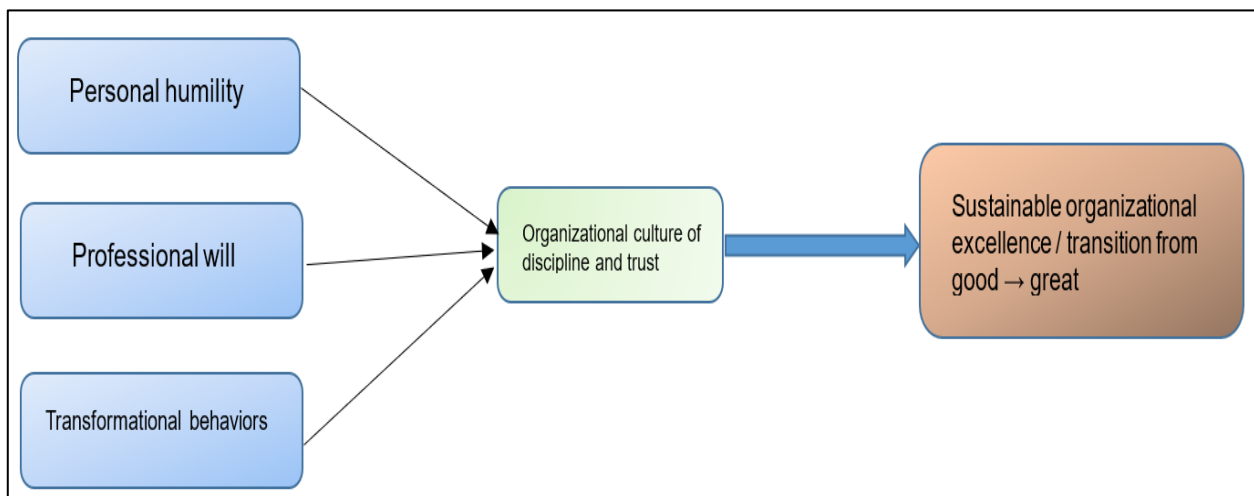
specifies performance systems. Early (2017), argues that modern leadership requires moral authority, adaptability, and relational intelligence rather than positional power.

Collins' framework can be read as an operationalization of values-based leadership: it translates inner qualities like humility, discipline, purpose into external excellence via concrete organizational choices: who gets hired ("First Who"), what is (and isn't) pursued (Hedgehog), how freedom is bounded (Culture of Discipline), and how momentum is built (Flywheel). In this reading, (Collins 2001). Level 5 supplies the character substrate, while the Collins mechanisms

supply the systemic scaffolding that embeds values into everyday work.

A more complete account of the journey from good to great emerges by combining Transformational Leadership Theory (explains psychological mechanisms, vision, meaning-making, follower growth), Level 5 Leadership (explains the character engine, humility plus the will that prioritizes mission over ego), and Cultural Leadership Theory (Litz, (2011), explains how leaders navigate tensions between global policy pressures and local school culture).

Conceptual Framework (Proposed)



The proposed conceptual framework illustrates how the integration of Level 5 Leadership traits and Transformational Leadership behaviors fosters sustainable organizational excellence. It posits that leaders who demonstrate personal humility, characterized by modesty, empathy, and openness to learning, combined with professional will, defined as determination, discipline, and purpose driven focus, create the moral and motivational foundation for lasting impact. When these internal qualities are expressed through transformational behaviors such as inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, they collectively shape an organizational culture of discipline and trust. This culture, in turn, becomes the mediating mechanism that enables the organization to transition from good to great, achieving not only high performance but also enduring values-based excellence. The framework highlights that sustainable greatness is not the result of charisma or authority, but of authentic, humble, and disciplined leadership that transforms both people and systems

Theoretical Propositions

Based on the integration of Level 5 Leadership, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Cultural Leadership Theory, this conceptual paper proposes the following theoretical relationships:

Proposition 1: Leaders who demonstrate a balanced combination of personal humility and professional will (Level 5 Leadership traits) are more likely to foster transformational change within their organizations (Niu, Gao & Yu, 2025). This proposition suggests that personal attributes of character and moral grounding form the foundation for leaders' capacity to inspire and transform others. Collins (2005), finds that the most successful leaders combine deep personal humility with intense professional will, a paradoxical blend of modesty and determination rarely found (Niu *et al.*, 2025; Jufri, Tjahjono, Muafi & Isfianadewi, 2025).

Proposition 2: Transformational leadership behaviors, specifically inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, mediate the relationship between leaders' personal

traits (humility and will) and organizational excellence (Osman-Gani & Hassan, 2018; Burhan & Khan, 2025). In other words, while humility and willpower provide the internal drive, transformational actions operationalize these traits into observable leadership outcomes that improve culture and performance (Hafeez & Siddiqui, 2024; Cristo, 2025). Bass (1999), concludes that transformational leadership is a universal approach to developing followers into future leaders by aligning personal goals with collective organizational purpose (Hassan & Yau, 2013; Teng & Hassan, 2015).

Proposition 3: A disciplined organizational culture, one that promotes accountability, ethical conduct, and consistent pursuit of purpose, strengthens the link between transformational leadership behaviors and sustained organizational greatness (Hamoumi, Benhadou & Haddout, 2025; Lapatoura, 2025; Mesaadah & Al Awaysha, 2025). This implies that leadership effectiveness is magnified in environments that institutionalize discipline and shared values, ensuring continuity of greatness beyond the leader's tenure (Harmoumi et al., 2025; Mesaadah et al., 2025; A-Clottey, 2025).

Proposition 4: The organizational culture fills with discipline and trust will causes to enhance sustainable organizational excellence or transit the organization from good to great (Ghaleb & Dahiam, 2024; Saputra, Citriadin & Rahman, 2025). This means when leaders are able to build an organizational culture of trust and self-disciplinary, it will enable its workforce to focus on organizational excellence resulting sustainable organizational excellence (great organizations) (Yakin, Agus, Baharun, & Mundiri, 2025). The personal humility combined with the trust among the workforce along with consistent self-disciplines causes to achieve sustainable organizational excellence (Sarif & Ismail, 2025).

Together, these propositions provide the theoretical foundation for an integrated model of Good to Great Leadership, explaining how internal virtues, transformational practices, and organizational culture interact to produce enduring excellence (Puthiya, 2025).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The concept of Good to Great Leadership (Collins, 2001; Collins, 2005), provides a timeless and insightful framework for understanding how leaders transition from achieving short-term performance outcomes to creating lasting

organizational impact. By emphasizing the development of both personal and organizational discipline, Jim Collins' model highlights that true greatness is built not through charisma or authority, but through the consistent practice of humility, purpose, and professional will. This paper extends that understanding by conceptually integrating Level 5 Leadership with Transformational Leadership Theory, demonstrating how the inner qualities of humility and will can be expressed through transformational behaviors such as vision, inspiration, and individualized support. This integration addresses a theoretical gap in both corporate and public-sector research by linking leader character to sustainable organizational excellence.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that leadership development initiatives should go beyond skill-based training to focus on cultivating moral character, ethical willpower, and culture-building competencies. Organizations should embed these qualities into leadership pipelines, performance evaluations, and mentoring systems to nurture leaders capable of long-term transformation rather than short-term achievement.

In terms of future research, the proposed conceptual framework warrants empirical testing across diverse Maldivian institutions, particularly schools, Ministries, and state enterprises, to validate the relationships between Level 5 traits, transformational leadership behaviors, and sustained organizational excellence. Such research would not only enrich the theoretical literature but also offer actionable insights for policymakers and leadership trainers seeking to build resilient, ethical, and high-performing public institutions.

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