

Towards a Relational Framework for CEO Capability: A Conceptual Paper with Pilot Evidence from the Top Management Perspective

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Abstract

This conceptual paper develops a relational framework for understanding Chief Executive Officer (CEO) capability as it operates within the CEO–top management team (TMT) dyad, and illustrates that framework with pilot evidence from a small qualitative inquiry. The paper argues that dominant structural and economic accounts of CEO capability, anchored in Upper Echelons and agency-theoretic traditions, are usefully complemented by a relational reading. On this reading, capability is co-produced in specific dyadic relationships and received, interpreted, and responded to by the senior managers who work most closely with CEOs. Drawing on role theory, relational leadership, and adjacent work on emotional intelligence and humble leadership, the paper synthesises these literatures into a framework in which personal characteristics function as a foundational layer shaping team collaborative skills, which in turn shape management style. Analytical skills operate as a baseline prerequisite rather than a relational differentiator. Pilot evidence from Critical Incident Interviewing (CII) with four senior line managers in multinational organisations, producing 117 inductive codes organised into nine categories and four themes, illustrates the framework and supports its use as a basis for a larger doctoral inquiry. The paper makes three contributions: a conceptual framework for CEO–TMT relational capability grounded in the receiving side of the dyad; a methodological evaluation of CII as a technique for elite C-suite research, with specific adaptations identified; and an insider, practitioner-informed register with implications for CEO selection, development, and board oversight. The pilot material is offered as illustrative and as justification for the larger study that will follow, not as generalisable empirical findings in its own right.

Keywords: CEO capability; top management team; CEO–TMT dyad; relational leadership; role theory; conceptual framework; critical incident interviewing; engaged scholarship.

1. Introduction

The demands placed on chief executive officers (CEOs) have grown significantly more complex in recent decades. In contemporary volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) business environments, the ability to align, motivate and lead senior management colleagues has emerged as a critical determinant of organisational performance (Sanchez-Marin and Baixauli-Soler, 2014). Yet while scholars have devoted considerable attention to CEO compensation, firm performance, and governance structures, the interpersonal and relational competencies enabling CEOs to lead their immediate top management teams productively remain comparatively under-researched (Koskinen and Lämsä, 2016).

The top management team (TMT), typically comprising the CEO's most senior direct reports, occupies a unique and consequential position in organisations. TMT members are simultaneously strategic partners, operational executors, and cultural stewards. Their alignment with, and confidence in, the CEO shapes organisational identity, decision-making quality, and the discretionary effort of hundreds or thousands of employees downstream (Ou et al., 2014). When this relationship falters, the consequences are significant, ranging from poor governance to talent attrition, strategic drift, and diminished performance.

Most existing literature on CEO capabilities has approached the subject through structural or economic lenses. Research has examined CEO compensation (Falato, Li and Milbourn, 2015; Carpenter and Sanders, 2002), governance mechanisms (Firth, Fung and Rui, 2007; Tourigny et al., 2003), and the behavioural effects of CEO personality traits such as narcissism or hubris on organisational outcomes (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007; Hayward and Hambrick, 1997; Malmendier and Tate, 2009). While illuminating, such studies largely examine CEOs as structural agents, filtering their influence through financial and governance lenses, and bypass the relational dimensions of leadership that may matter most to those working alongside the CEO.

A smaller but growing body of scholarship has shifted focus towards relational and interpersonal dimensions of CEO leadership (Koskinen and Lämsä, 2016; Melwani and Rothman, 2022). While survey-based research has captured TMT perceptions of CEO leadership (for example, in the humble leadership tradition; Ou et al., 2014), qualitative, insider accounts from senior direct reports themselves, drawing on their day-to-day experience of CEO leadership, remain comparatively rare. This gap is partly explained by access challenges inherent in studying elite populations: top line managers are pressed for time, and the political sensitivities at the apex of organisations make candid data difficult to obtain.

This paper addresses this gap conceptually. It synthesises role theory, relational leadership scholarship, and adjacent work on emotional intelligence and humble leadership into a conceptual framework for CEO capability as it operates within the CEO–TMT dyad, and it illustrates that framework with pilot evidence from a small qualitative inquiry conducted using Critical Incident Interviewing (CII) with four senior line managers in multinational organisations. The pilot is deliberately small and serves two functions: to illustrate the conceptual framework with insider voice from senior direct reports, and to test the viability of CII as a data collection method for the larger doctoral study that will follow. Two

framing commitments should be made explicit at the outset. First, the pilot captures one side of a two-sided dyad: the CEO's own perspective is not represented in this material and is reserved for the doctoral study. Second, the pilot material is offered as illustrative and as justification for the larger inquiry, not as generalisable empirical findings in its own right. The paper speaks to scholars, practitioners, and executive development professionals who share an interest in how CEOs can lead more effectively at the apex of complex organisations.

This paper contributes to the theme of this year's EMS conference, "Bright Ideas, Lasting Impact," by offering a practice-proximate inquiry into the relational conditions that enable C-suite leadership to deliver lasting organisational value.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Upper Echelons and CEO capabilities

The foundational premise that executive characteristics significantly shape organisational outcomes was formalised in Hambrick and Mason's (1984) Upper Echelons Theory, which proposed that strategic choices and firm performance reflect the values, cognitive frames, and personalities of the organisation's top managers. Building on this tradition, Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) identified a range of CEO-level characteristics, including experience, personality, and values, that influence strategic decision-making. Subsequent research has extended this framework, demonstrating how CEO attributes such as overconfidence (Malmendier and Tate, 2009), narcissism (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007), and humility (Ou et al., 2014) shape not only firm-level outcomes but also internal dynamics, including TMT cohesion and team integration. Related work has shown that structural features of the TMT itself, such as pay dispersion in new venture contexts, carry their own consequences for team-level outcomes (Ensley, Pearson and Sardeshmukh, 2007), reinforcing the importance of looking inside the TMT rather than treating it as a homogeneous adjunct to the CEO.

Research into CEO "productive abilities," meaning the skills and competencies for which CEOs are rewarded in the market, has largely relied on compensation as a proxy (Falato, Li and Milbourn, 2015). While useful as a starting point, such approaches conflate market valuation with genuine capability, and bypass the relational dimensions of leadership that may matter most to those working alongside the CEO. The result is a literature rich in structural accounts but sparse in relational ones.

2.2 Agency Theory and its limits at the top

Agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976) has long provided the dominant conceptual framework for understanding C-suite relationships, framing CEO-board and CEO-TMT dynamics primarily in terms of principal-agent dynamics: information asymmetry, incentive alignment, and monitoring mechanisms (Carpenter and Sanders, 2002; Firth, Fung and Rui, 2007). Moderating variables such as ownership structure (Mangel and Singh, 1993), executive compensation (Baixauli-Soler and Sanchez-Marin, 2015), and governance quality have attracted substantial research attention within this tradition.

However, agency theory has been critiqued for reducing fundamentally human relationships to economic transactions. Koskinen and Lämsä (2016) argued that the CEO-TMT relationship extends well beyond economic exchange, encompassing social, relational, and emotional dimensions that agency theory is poorly equipped to capture. Similarly, Melwani and Rothman (2022) demonstrated

that ambivalent “frenemies” relationships, characterised by mixtures of positive and negative affect, are common in workplace dyads, producing complex, non-linear effects that no purely structural model can anticipate. These critiques open the door to more relational frameworks.

2.3 Role Theory and relational leadership perspectives

Role theory offers a more nuanced conceptual lens for understanding CEO–TMT dynamics. In the organisational context, role theory proposes that the behaviours and expectations characterising leadership are defined, negotiated, and sustained through social interactions (Koskinen and Lämsä, 2016). The CEO’s role is not simply a formal position but an enacted identity continuously shaped by the perceptions of those who work most closely with them. How the CEO enacts their role, whether they are visible, inclusive, delegating, or directive, determines the relational field within which the TMT operates.

Mintzberg (1973) identified three clusters of managerial roles, namely interpersonal, informational, and decisional. The interpersonal roles (figurehead, leader, liaison) are precisely those that TMT members experience most directly. Alexander (2007) identified communication competence and reputational management as core CEO capabilities, framing the CEO role partly as a public performance. Yin, Zhang and Han (2020) demonstrated that CEO–board social ties influence organisational outcomes through trust and information quality, pointing to the relational nature of top-level leadership effectiveness.

Koskinen and Lämsä’s (2017) study of CEO–chair relationships traced the development of trust as a dynamic, relational process, underscoring the importance of authentic communication, consistency, and mutual respect as building blocks of effective C-suite relationships. Kakabadse, Kakabadse and Knyght (2010) made a complementary contribution from the governance-practitioner tradition, arguing that the working effectiveness of top dyads rests on a “chemistry” that goes beyond formal role prescriptions and that is, in practice, relationally co-produced by the incumbents of the roles. Work on the CEO–Chairperson dyad (Stephens, Srour and Carmeli, 2024) has brought a micro-foundational logic to this terrain, showing how constructive emotional expression at the apex shapes organisational communication climate and firm-level capabilities; the present paper examines the adjacent CEO–TMT dyad. More recent work in the social identity tradition of leadership (Steffens, Munt, van Knippenberg, Platow and Haslam, 2021) has extended this relational turn by articulating how leaders and followers co-construct shared identity through repeated interaction, lending further weight to the argument that leadership at the apex of organisations is best understood as relationally enacted rather than structurally assigned. Taken together, this body of work points to a broader principle, that the capabilities most consequential at the apex of organisations are relational and social, rather than technical or strategic.

2.4 Adjacent perspectives: Emotional Intelligence and Humble Leadership

Two adjacent literatures deserve explicit positioning, as they share surface-level affinity with the themes engaged in this paper. The first is the emotional intelligence (EI) tradition (Goleman, 1998), which argues that leadership effectiveness rests on self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. The second is the humble leadership literature, most notably Owens and Hekman’s (2012) inductive work on humble leader behaviours (acknowledging limitations, spotlighting follower strengths, and modelling teachability) and its links to team performance and learning (Owens, Johnson and Mitchell, 2013). More recent work has emphasised that leadership behaviours are experienced and interpreted by followers on a daily, interactional basis (Kelemen, Matthews and Breevaart, 2020),

drawing attention to the receiving side of the relationship rather than the leader's attributes in isolation. Alongside these developments, broader reflection on the post-pandemic relevance of established leadership theory (Petriglieri, 2020) has raised the question of whether dominant frameworks, most of which were developed and validated in pre-VUCA conditions, fully capture what executives now actually do with and for one another.

The present study's terrain overlaps substantially with both literatures. The codes grouped under Personal Characteristics in the findings that follow (authenticity, openness, emotional attentiveness, self-awareness, visibility) map closely onto Goleman's EI competency domains and onto the humble leader behaviours identified by Owens and Hekman (2012). In this sense, the findings are best understood as confirming and extending established work rather than departing from it. The modest additional contribution made here lies in the dyadic, receiving-side framing: the study treats CEO capability as a relational experience reported by senior direct reports, rather than a set of traits or behaviours measured at the leader. EI is typically operationalised as an individual-level construct carried by the leader; humble leadership is a behavioural style observed and often rated externally. What senior direct reports describe in this study is how these capabilities are received, interpreted, and acted on within a specific dyadic relationship. This framing complements the leader-centric orientation of EI and humble leadership scholarship by adding a qualitative, insider account of how such capabilities land with the people most affected by them.

2.5 The gap: CEO relational capabilities in the TMT dyad

What is common across this body of literature is an acknowledgement that the direct, insider perspective of TMT members is missing. The access challenges involved in studying elite populations have left a significant empirical gap. Most research examines CEO behaviour through governance disclosures, compensation data, or third-party ratings, rather than through accounts of those who work alongside CEOs on a daily basis.

House and Aditya (1997) noted the persistent gap between leadership theory and the experiential reality of those led. As they observed, research traditions in organisational leadership have tended to study leaders as objects of analysis rather than engaging with leadership as a relational phenomenon. The present study addresses this gap directly, bringing TMT members' voices into the scholarly conversation and offering an insider perspective that complements and challenges existing structural accounts.

3. Research question and rationale

The conceptual framework developed in Section 2 supports a research agenda organised around a single guiding question. The pilot inquiry reported in this paper is positioned within the constructivist-interpretivist tradition and was designed to serve two purposes: to illustrate the conceptual framework with insider voice from senior direct reports, and to test the viability of Critical Incident Interviewing as a data collection method for the larger doctoral study that will follow. The central research question guiding the inquiry is:

“How do senior line managers describe and evaluate the leadership capabilities of the CEOs they work with?”

This question is positioned at the intersection of role theory, relational leadership, and the CEO capabilities literature. It acknowledges that capability is contextual: what makes a CEO effective in the eyes of the TMT is not a fixed list of traits or skills, but a dynamic set of behaviours and capacities as perceived and experienced by those who work most closely with them. Engaging this question conceptually, and illustrating it with pilot evidence, carries theoretical relevance by articulating a framework for an underexplored facet of CEO–TMT research, and practical relevance for executive selection, leadership development, and coaching. Three qualifications should be made explicit. First, the pilot material is offered as illustrative rather than as empirical findings in their own right. Second, the inquiry captures one side of a two-sided dyad: the CEO’s own perspective is not represented here and is reserved for the doctoral study. Third, the questions of method viability and framework usefulness are answered only provisionally in this paper; the pilot is an input to, not a resolution of, the doctoral inquiry.

Given the EMS conference theme of “Bright Ideas, Lasting Impact,” this inquiry speaks squarely to the challenge of translating rigorous scholarship into actionable insights for the development of organisational leadership at the highest levels.

4. Methodology

This study is anchored in constructivism (ontology) and interpretivism (epistemology). A constructivist ontological position holds that the social reality explored in this research, namely the relational dynamics between CEOs and their TMT, is not independently given but individually and socially constructed by the participants involved. An interpretivist epistemological stance recognises that making sense of these relationships requires interpretive engagement with participants’ own accounts and meaning-making.

A qualitative methodology was adopted as the most appropriate vehicle for this inquiry. Qualitative approaches enable the capture of rich, contextualised data on complex social phenomena, which is the kind of data required to understand the interpersonal and relational dimensions of CEO–TMT interactions. Quantitative methods would reduce these dynamics to variables and proxies that cannot capture the texture and nuance of lived relational experience.

Critical Incident Interviewing (CII), developed by Flanagan (1954), was selected as the primary data collection method. CII is an established technique for eliciting rich behavioural data by prompting participants to recall specific, concrete situations, both successful and challenging, in which particular skills or behaviours were deployed. By anchoring participants’ accounts in specific incidents rather than abstract generalisations, CII minimises the risk of socially desirable responding and facilitates the collection of contextually grounded evidence (Flanagan, 1954). The focused, time-efficient format of CII is also well-suited to the practical constraints of researching senior executives whose schedules leave limited space for extended academic engagement.

4.1 Engaged Scholarship positioning

This study sits within the scholar-practitioner tradition that the EMS community and the Executive DBA Council more broadly seek to advance, and it is appropriate to be explicit about how, and how not, it engages with the engaged scholarship frameworks of Boyer (1996) and Van de Ven (2007). Of Boyer’s four scholarships (discovery, integration, application, and teaching), the present inquiry aligns

most closely with the scholarship of application: it addresses a practical problem encountered in executive life and aims to generate knowledge that practitioners can use in CEO selection, development, and board oversight. It also carries elements of the scholarship of discovery, in that the pilot opens up an under-examined empirical angle on CEO–TMT dynamics. The most visible form of engagement in this pilot is that the researcher is a senior executive working inside the phenomenon under study, and the research questions emerged from that practice rather than from a purely academic prompt. In this sense, the inquiry is practice-proximate by construction.

It is equally important to acknowledge what this pilot did not do. The study was not formally co-designed with a practitioner community; participants were engaged as interviewees rather than as co-producers of the inquiry; and findings have not yet been validated through structured member-checking or practitioner dialogue sessions. The pilot therefore falls short of the fuller co-production standards that a Boyer- or Van de Ven-consistent engaged study would meet.

Two implications follow: First, the findings are offered to the EMS community in the spirit of early practitioner-informed scholarship, not as the output of a fully co-produced programme. Second, the doctoral study that this pilot supports is being designed with stronger engagement built in: including feedback loops with a practitioner reference group drawn from CEO and senior leadership communities, structured member-checking with interview participants, and dissemination through practitioner channels (executive education, board advisory networks, and DBA alumni forums) alongside academic outlets. The intended pathway to practitioner impact runs through CEO selection, executive development, and board oversight, which are discussed in Section 8.2.

5. Methods

5.1 Purposive sampling

The study drew on purposive sampling to identify participants with direct experience of CEO–TMT relational dynamics. Participants were senior line managers, direct reports to C-suite executives, working in multinational enterprise contexts. Sampling was not restricted to any particular industry or national context in order to avoid over-indexing on sector-specific norms. Participants were selected independently of each other, and at random, to minimise the risk of cross-contamination of narratives and to enable a more free-flowing account without fear of repercussion. Four participants were recruited for this study, a sample size consistent with the exploratory and theory-generating aims of this inquiry.

5.2 Study sample and gatekeepers

The sample comprised four senior line managers with direct reporting relationships to C-suite superiors. Access was facilitated through the researcher's professional network within the top management of multinational corporations, a network that proved essential for accessing a population that is otherwise difficult to reach. Finding participants who were willing to reflect candidly on their CEO's capabilities required careful management of gatekeeper relationships and sensitivity to the political dynamics of elite environments. Time emerged as a critical constraint: scheduling interviews with senior executives required considerable advance planning and flexibility. The participants varied in the time horizon from which they drew their accounts. Most referenced a mix of pre-pandemic and pandemic-period experience with different CEOs, and one participant, retired at the time of the interview, drew exclusively on pre-COVID relationships. The resulting dataset therefore spans a range of organisational

and economic conditions rather than being bound to the pandemic period specifically, a point returned to in the Discussion.

5.3 Data collection

Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured protocol drawing on CII principles. The interview schedule comprised six main questions designed to elicit situational narratives relating to positive and negative CEO–TMT interactions. Situational prompts such as “thinking of a particularly successful/challenging interaction, how did you...” guided participants toward specific incident-based accounts. Neutral probing questions, including “can you elaborate on this?” and “what else?,” elicited depth without leading participants or introducing researcher bias. All interviews employed verbal ethical contracting, including informed consent, confidentiality assurance, and the principle of unconditional positive regard.

5.4 Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using an inductive, line-by-line coding approach combining *in vivo* coding (retaining participants’ own words) and descriptive coding (summarising contextual sections). This dual approach preserved the contextual richness of participants’ language while enabling structured thematic comparison across accounts. Codes were subsequently grouped into categories through iterative analysis, culminating in the crystallisation of four primary themes. The researcher took deliberate steps to minimise bias, establishing rapport before interviews, using neutral follow-up probes, and bracketing personal experience, all of which were particularly relevant given the researcher’s own background in senior management roles. The analysis produced 117 individual codes, organised into nine categories: team collaboration skills, personal characteristics, external influencing factors, management style, situational attributes, job requirements, soft skills, analytical skills, and technical skills, which subsequently resolved into four overarching themes. Participant quotations reproduced in the findings section are presented verbatim, including colloquial phrasing and discourse markers, consistent with the *in vivo* coding tradition and with qualitative reporting norms that prioritise the preservation of participant voice over stylistic normalisation.

5.5 Methodological observations: testing CII in practice

A central purpose of this study was not only to apply Critical Incident Interviewing but to evaluate its suitability as a data collection method for researching CEO–TMT relational dynamics in preparation for a larger doctoral inquiry. Several important methodological observations emerged from this process.

First, participants found it challenging to recall single, bounded incidents in the manner that classical CII prescribes. Rather than identifying one discrete critical event, respondents more naturally produced clusters of situational behaviours and recurring patterns, which can be described as collections of moments rather than isolated episodes. This was particularly pronounced in the context of COVID-19 and broader organisational uncertainty, where the absence of a CEO combined with team conflict aversion produced complex, multi-layered situations that resisted reduction to a single incident. However, this deviation from the classical CII format proved to be an asset: the richer, more contextualised narratives that resulted generated a greater density and variety of codes than strictly incident-bound responses would have. This suggests that in elite C-suite research contexts, a modified

CII approach, one that tolerates and encourages situational-behavioural clusters rather than insisting on discrete incidents, may yield superior data.

Second, establishing rapport before each interview proved essential to unlocking candid and reflective data. Given the political sensitivity of the subject matter (participants were being asked to evaluate their superiors), participants required a clear sense of psychological safety before engaging openly. Verbal ethical contracting, including explicit confidentiality assurances and the principle of unconditional positive regard, was an effective mechanism for creating this environment. Future research should build deliberate rapport-building time into interview schedules and resist the temptation to compress interviews for the sake of executive convenience.

Third, neutral open probing questions, specifically “can you elaborate on this?” and “what else?,” proved significantly more productive than structured follow-up questions. These minimal prompts encouraged participants to deepen their narratives without introducing researcher framing, thereby minimising interpreter bias and generating richer, more authentic accounts. This represents a refinement of the interview schedule that was carried forward into the design of the subsequent doctoral study.

Fourth, the combination of in vivo and descriptive coding proved well-suited to this type of data. Retaining participants’ own words through in vivo coding preserved the affective and evaluative nuance of their accounts, which was particularly important when participants were characterising CEO behaviours in strongly personal terms. Descriptive coding, applied where participants narrated contextual circumstances, enabled the structured comparison needed for thematic synthesis. The two approaches proved complementary rather than competing, and their combination is recommended for future qualitative inquiry into elite relational dynamics.

Overall, the study confirmed that CII is a viable and productive method for researching CEO–TMT relational dynamics, while identifying specific adaptations (modified incident framing, extended rapport-building, and minimal probing) that improve its effectiveness in the C-suite context. Taken together, these observations position this pilot explicitly as a scaling test: its primary function was to establish whether CII, with the adaptations identified above, can yield sufficiently rich data from time-pressured, reputationally exposed senior executives to support a full doctoral inquiry. The answer that emerges is a qualified yes, and these methodological learnings constitute an explicit contribution of this study alongside the substantive findings.

6. Pilot evidence: illustrating the framework

6.1 Overview

This section presents pilot evidence gathered to illustrate the conceptual framework developed in Section 2 and to assess the viability of CII for the larger doctoral inquiry. The four interviews were conducted over a three-month period, each transcribed and analysed using the inductive coding process described above. Four overarching themes emerged from the coding: Team Collaborative Skills (TCS), Personal Characteristics (PC), Management Style (MS), and Analytical Skills (AS). Across the small sample, all four participants emphasised relational and interpersonal capabilities as the primary determinants of effective CEO leadership, while treating analytical and technical capabilities as foundational prerequisites rather than differentiating competencies. The material that follows is offered not as empirical findings in their own right, but as illustrative evidence that the framework has purchase

in practitioner accounts and that the pilot method is capable of surfacing the kind of insider voice the doctoral study will require.

6.2 Theme 1: Team Collaborative Skills (TCS)

Team collaborative skills emerged as the most richly coded theme, encompassing a broad cluster of relational and communicative behaviours perceived by participants as essential for productive CEO–TMT interaction. Key codes within this theme included listening, inclusivity, communication, empowerment, delegation, and employee recognition.

Participants were emphatic that CEOs must possess genuine, visible listening skills: not performative engagement, but authentic receptivity to the views and concerns of their TMT members. The significance of active listening was linked in particular to the CEO's ability to access ground-level intelligence about the organisation:

“I think it's coming back to them listening again and understanding that people lower down the organisation often see the problems, or see the areas that can be improved, cause you are directly at the grassroots level.” (Participant 2)

Communication skills were identified as indispensable: not merely clarity of expression but the ability to convey strategic vision in ways that are inclusive, motivating, and honest. CEOs who communicated effectively were described as creating a culture of transparency and mutual accountability:

“They gotta be open, transparent, honest, listening skills, not just top-down orators... they gotta be somebody who has the gravitas to lead the organisation, to motivate people, to set the tone, but equally who is not too arrogant that they can't ask for other people's opinions.” (Participant 1)

Delegation and empowerment were closely linked: participants valued CEOs who granted their direct reports meaningful autonomy to define and execute solutions, rather than prescribing outcomes. This was seen not as operational efficiency alone, but also as a signal of trust and professional respect:

“I think the fruitful relationship would be when you are given a task and allowed to go and find a solution yourself and come back with the solution, as opposed to being given a solution and being told to implement it.” (Participant 1)

6.3 Theme 2: Foundational Personal Characteristics (PC)

Personal characteristics represented the cluster of individual attributes perceived by participants as foundational to the CEO's relational effectiveness. Key codes included authenticity, openness, honesty, visibility, conviction, bravery, inclusiveness, and approachability. Authenticity and openness were repeatedly cited as the bedrock of trust in the CEO–TMT relationship. Participants consistently preferred CEOs who were genuinely themselves, with appropriate vulnerability and self-awareness, over those who performed leadership from behind a façade of authority:

“In short it would be focused on openness and honesty. That's how you get the team moving.” (Participant 4)

“Crucial skills would be directness, focus, clarity, honesty, integrity, resilience, adaptability, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, understanding and listening skills.” (Participant 4)

Visibility was identified as a particularly significant personal attribute: the extent to which a CEO was physically and relationally present and accessible to their team. This went beyond formal communication channels, encompassing informal presence on the shop floor, openness to ad hoc conversation, and genuine interest in people at all levels:

“I think often it is about visibility. Let the person on the shop floor see you, have a chat with them, make them feel appreciated. Productivity can only go up.” (Participant 3)

By contrast, CEOs characterised by distance, arrogance, or excessive self-interest were perceived as corrosive to team dynamics:

“He was not a pleasant man. Very autocratic. Used to play the MDs against each other. He was in it only for the money.” (Participant 2)

“He was just simply a nice and inclusive guy. Great communicator. Made you feel appreciated.” (Participant 3)

These contrasting accounts underscored a consistent theme: that the personal qualities a CEO brings to their relationships, rather than their formal authority or technical expertise, determine the relational climate within the TMT.

6.4 Theme 3: Management Style and Trust (MS)

Management style represented a third, distinct theme, perceived by participants as both an expression of personal characteristics and a determinant of team performance and motivation. The key distinction drawn was between empowering and delegating management styles on the one hand, and directive, top-down, and micromanaging styles on the other. Participants consistently valued CEOs who gave their teams strategic direction and clear intent, then trusted them to determine the means:

“I feel that now that we are in this new world order, there is a different scenario, where a lot of the strategies just come top down, or the solutions come top down and if you want to do anything that deviates from that, it is very difficult.” (Participant 1)

Trust, or its absence, was identified as the crucial variable underpinning management style. Where trust was absent, participants reported environments characterised by anxiety, disengagement, and performative compliance:

“There was just this constant feeling of doing something wrong. There was no trust from above. Instead it was mostly micromanagement. At least that is what it felt like. Very uncomfortable. Definitely not productive.” (Participant 4)

The relational consequences of poor management style were also manifest in a breakdown of communication and collective will:

“When the communication broke down, it was mainly because of his confrontative behaviour. People stopped caring.” (Participant 2)

“I think it is all about authenticity, openness and honesty. Tell me what you want and be clear about it. Communicate your vision clearly.” (Participant 3)

6.5 Theme 4: Analytical Skills as Baseline Prerequisite (AS)

Analytical skills constituted the fourth theme, though their status in participants' accounts was qualitatively different from the preceding themes. Rather than being positioned as differentiating competencies, analytical and business skills were treated as de facto prerequisites for occupying a CEO role, meaning baseline expectations rather than sources of relational advantage. Participants acknowledged that CEOs must possess the analytical capacity to understand the business environment, make informed decisions, and synthesise complex information:

“He was very good with figures. Spoke figures mainly. As long as we had a healthy bottomline, he was fine.” (Participant 2)

“He knew exactly what he was doing. Very clever man. He had a level of foresight that was quite impressive.” (Participant 3)

Deep industry-specific knowledge was not considered important as a relational differentiator:

“Essentially, he knew nothing technical about the business. He was just a really good business man and got the deals in.” (Participant 3)

Continuous learning and intellectual curiosity were valued as ongoing personal practices, extending the notion of analytical capability beyond static expertise:

“Regardless of role, e.g., senior executive or line employee, one must never stop learning and pursuing new knowledge.” (Participant 4)

6.6 Relationships between themes

The pilot material reveals a coherent pattern across participants' accounts that maps onto, and extends, the conceptual framework articulated in Section 2. A CEO's personal characteristics (PC) functioned in participants' accounts as the foundational layer, shaping the quality of team collaborative skills (TCS). These collaborative behaviours, in turn, influenced participants' experience of CEO management style (MS) and the climate of trust and motivation within the TMT. CEO analytical skills (AS), while treated as a baseline prerequisite, were not identified as a driver of relational quality. This pattern is summarised in Figure 1 and constitutes the conceptual framework developed in this paper. The framework is a direct answer to the research question: it represents what senior line managers describe and evaluate as consequential about CEO capability, not a portrait of CEO capability in the abstract.

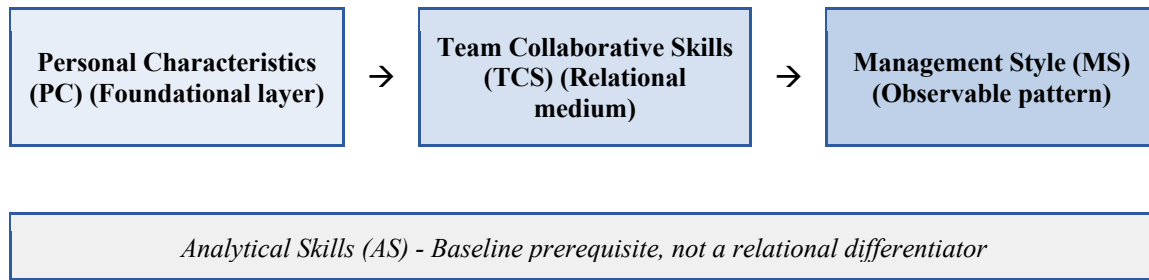


Figure 1. A Relational Framework for CEO Capability from the Top Management Perspective. The three-component chain above (PC → TCS → MS) represents the relational pathway: CEO personal characteristics shape team collaborative skills, which in turn shape CEO management style. CEO Analytical Skills appear below as a separate, parallel baseline, not as a downstream output of Management Style. The framework is developed from the literature reviewed in Section 2 and illustrated by the pilot material.

7. Discussion

The pilot material illustrates and extends the conceptual framework developed in Section 2 in several ways. First, it adds qualitative, insider texture to the relational turn in CEO–TMT scholarship, supporting the framework’s central claim that the quality of CEO–TMT relationships, as experienced by senior direct reports, is shaped above all by interpersonal and relational capabilities, rather than by structural, economic, or cognitive factors alone. This is consistent with the theoretical frameworks proposed by Koskinen and Lämsä (2016) and Melwani and Rothman (2022), and with recent work drawing attention to how leadership behaviours are experienced on a daily, dyadic basis by direct reports (Kelemen, Matthews and Breevaart, 2020). The pilot sits uneasily with the agency-theoretic framing that has dominated much of the CEO capabilities literature, although with four participants it cannot displace that framing on its own.

It is worth being explicit about how the pilot material should be read within this conceptual paper. The four interviews do not establish prevalence, causality, or generalisable findings, and are not intended to do so. Their function here is dual: to illustrate that the framework developed in Section 2 has purchase in practitioner accounts, and to surface candidate propositions for the doctoral study that will follow. The claims made in this section therefore take the form of connections between the framework and the pilot material, rather than conclusions derived solely from the pilot. The phrasing throughout has been chosen to reflect this scope.

The centrality of personal characteristics, including authenticity, openness, and visibility, as the foundation of effective CEO–TMT relationships supports a role-theoretic interpretation. CEOs, as role incumbents, enact their leadership through the qualities and behaviours they bring to their relationships with their immediate team. How a CEO is seen, whether as approachable or aloof, genuine or performative, empowering or controlling, shapes the relational field within which the TMT operates. This enacted dimension of the CEO role, as articulated by Koskinen and Lämsä (2016), is not captured by compensation data or governance structures: it is lived in the day-to-day texture of working relationships.

The finding that analytical and technical skills are perceived as baseline prerequisites, necessary but not differentiating, carries theoretical and practical implications that are worth drawing out, while being careful not to over-claim from a sample of four. Scholars who have used pay as a proxy for CEO capability (Falato, Li and Milbourn, 2015) may, in doing so, have measured market valuation of technical and strategic competence while relational capabilities that shape team functioning remain

comparatively invisible in the data. The tentative implication, offered as a proposition for further investigation rather than as a conclusion from this pilot, is that relational skills may function as a moderating factor that deserves more systematic attention in future work within the Upper Echelons tradition (Hambrick and Mason, 1984).

The relationship between management style and trust deserves particular attention. Participants' accounts of poor management, characterised by micromanagement, confrontation, and top-down control, were associated not merely with frustration but with active disengagement and a breakdown of the collaborative social contract within the TMT. This echoes Ou et al. (2014), who demonstrated that humble CEOs achieved superior TMT integration and elicited more positive responses throughout the organisation. The participants' accounts are consistent with the inverse implication, that non-humble, controlling CEO behaviour erodes relational capital, although it would be over-reaching to claim this pattern from four interviews. What the present data can support is that these four participants experienced it that way, and that inviting TMT members to describe that experience directly is itself the contribution of a study designed to foreground their voices.

The VUCA context in which these accounts were gathered is worth foregrounding, with a note of caution. The interviews were conducted during and shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, and pandemic-era uncertainty did surface in some accounts, particularly where participants described reduced CEO visibility or conflict-averse leadership under pressure. However, most of what participants described was not pandemic-specific. Their reflections ranged across CEOs they had worked with over the course of long careers, and included clearly pre-COVID relationships, most notably in the case of one retired participant who drew exclusively on earlier experience. The relational capabilities that emerged as salient (visibility, listening, clarity of communication, authenticity, and the willingness to delegate) were therefore described as consequential across a range of conditions rather than as distinctively pandemic-era qualities. What the VUCA framing adds is a reading of why such capabilities may have particular weight under sustained uncertainty: consistent with Sanchez-Marín and Baixauli-Soler's (2014) observation that the skills through which CEOs navigate uncertainty are increasingly consequential for organisational prosperity, the present accounts suggest that relational capabilities become more visible, and more consequential, when the structural and strategic context offers fewer easy answers. The present pilot does not test crisis-leadership propositions directly, and the proposition that relational capability becomes more, not less, determinative of CEO effectiveness under sustained uncertainty is offered as a candidate question for the larger doctoral study that this pilot supports.

Taken together, the observations in this section suggest a possible refinement to the way role, agency, and relational theory are combined in understanding CEO–TMT dynamics. The participants' accounts point towards a model in which the relational dimension mediates the expression of the role and sets the context within which agency mechanisms operate. A CEO whose relational skills are strong (authentic, visible, empowering, and communicative) may create conditions under which formal governance mechanisms become largely supplementary to day-to-day team functioning. Where relational skills are weak, structural interventions may mitigate but, on the evidence of these accounts, cannot substitute for what is missing at the human level. This proposition is offered as a working hypothesis for the doctoral study that will follow, not as an empirical conclusion from this pilot.

8. Contributions and implications

8.1 Contributions to literature

This paper makes three contributions to the literature on CEO capabilities and the CEO–TMT dyad. First, it articulates a conceptual framework for CEO capability as a relational, receiving-side phenomenon: a synthesis of role theory, relational leadership, and adjacent work on emotional intelligence and humble leadership into a single coherent reading, in which personal characteristics function as a foundational layer, team collaborative skills as the relational medium, management style as the observable pattern, and analytical skills as a baseline prerequisite. The framework does not displace existing structural or trait-based accounts but complements them by attending to what senior direct reports experience and respond to in practice.

Second, the paper makes a specific methodological contribution by evaluating CII as a data collection method in C-suite research. It not only applied CII but assessed its fitness for purpose in researching CEO–TMT relational dynamics, identifying adaptations that improve its effectiveness in elite organisational contexts: a modified incident framing that accommodates situational-behavioural clusters, deliberate rapport-building prior to interviews, minimal neutral probing rather than structured follow-up questions, and the complementary use of in vivo and descriptive coding. These refinements constitute a methodological roadmap for the larger qualitative inquiry into C-suite leadership relationships that this pilot supports, and for other researchers engaging elite populations in comparable ways.

Third, the pilot material itself, while not offered as generalisable empirical findings, adds a qualitative, insider register to a literature that has largely been leader-centric and survey-based. The four interviews illustrate how the framework translates into the language and experience of senior direct reports, and offer a small set of practitioner accounts (visibility, listening, authenticity, and the granting of discretion) that future research can test against larger and more diverse samples. Read together with established work on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) and humble leadership (Owens and Hekman, 2012; Owens, Johnson and Mitchell, 2013), the pilot material is best understood as confirming and extending those frameworks rather than departing from them, with the additional contribution of attending to the receiving side of the dyad.

8.2 Implications for practice

With the scope limits of a conceptual paper and pilot material in mind, several practical implications can be drawn tentatively. For boards and nomination committees, the framework prompts a question about the prevailing emphasis on technical expertise and industry credentials in CEO selection: on this reading, relational competencies (authenticity, listening, empowerment, and visibility) may be at least as important to CEO–TMT relational effectiveness as domain knowledge or financial acumen, and are worth making explicit in selection criteria and assessment conversations.

For executive development and coaching professionals, the four themes identified in this study offer a coherent framework for structuring leadership development interventions. Personal characteristics, while partly dispositional, are also developable, particularly through reflective practices, 360-degree feedback, and coaching conversations that surface and address blind spots in relational behaviour.

For CEOs and aspiring C-suite executives, the findings offer a clear message: the relational climate you create, through your presence, authenticity, communication style, and willingness to empower others, is the primary driver of your TMT's experience of you as a leader. On the evidence of these accounts, technical mastery is expected; it is relational mastery that participants identified as setting effective CEOs apart.

9. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations of this study should be noted. The sample size of four participants, while appropriate for exploratory qualitative inquiry, does not permit claims of generalisability. The findings represent initial, provisional insights rather than established patterns. Future research with larger, more diverse samples, across sectors, cultures, and organisational contexts, will be necessary to assess the robustness and transferability of these findings.

The study draws exclusively on the TMT perspective: it captures how CEO leadership is perceived and experienced, not how it is intended or enacted by CEOs themselves. Future research that incorporates the CEO's own perspective and triangulates across both sides of the dyad would offer a richer and more complete account of CEO–TMT relational dynamics.

The researcher's own background as a senior C-suite executive is acknowledged as a potential source of bias, and deserves particular attention given the engaged-scholarship tradition within which this work sits. The researcher's experience of CEO–TMT dynamics was simultaneously a condition of access (participants agreed to be interviewed partly on the strength of professional relationships that pre-dated the study) and a resource for interpretation, enabling the researcher to recognise textures in participants' accounts that a pure outsider might have missed. It was also, inevitably, a source of framing that may have amplified some narratives more than others. The strategy adopted was not to claim neutrality but to make positionality visible: maintaining a reflexive journal alongside the interviews, testing emerging interpretations against full transcripts rather than salient quotes, and bracketing personal experience during analytical judgements. Future research should further strengthen this through independent coders, peer review of coding decisions, and formal member checking with a subset of participants.

A related limitation concerns the homogeneity of the sample. All four participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network within the senior management of multinational corporations. While this access route was practically essential, as senior executives are difficult to recruit via arm's-length channels, it means that participants are likely to share professional norms, corporate cultural backgrounds, and expectations about what constitutes good leadership. Such a sample may disproportionately reflect the managerial cultures of large Anglo-American and Northern European organisations, in which particular relational virtues (authenticity, visibility, empowerment) are already valorised in dominant leadership discourses. The capabilities that participants valued, and the relative weight they gave them, may therefore be culturally specific rather than universal. Future research should explicitly test these patterns in more diverse cultural and organisational settings, including non-Western managerial contexts, family-owned enterprises, and public-sector organisations.

Finally, the study does not account for moderating variables that may influence CEO–TMT relational quality, including organisational culture, sector context, and relational history between specific CEO–TMT pairs. These represent fruitful avenues for future inquiry, particularly as this pilot work develops into a full doctoral study with a substantially larger and more diverse sample.

10. Conclusion

This paper set out to articulate a relational framework for CEO capability as it operates within the CEO–TMT dyad, and to illustrate that framework with pilot evidence from a small qualitative inquiry. Drawing on Upper Echelons theory, agency theory, role theory, relational leadership, and adjacent work on emotional intelligence and humble leadership, the framework positions personal characteristics as the foundational layer, team collaborative skills as the relational medium, management style as the observable pattern, and analytical skills as a baseline prerequisite. Pilot material from Critical Incident Interviewing with four senior line managers in multinational organisations, yielding 117 inductive codes organised into four overarching themes, illustrates how the framework translates into the language and experience of senior direct reports.

The framework and the pilot material together offer a provisional challenge to the prevailing emphasis on technical and structural factors in CEO capability research. From the perspective of the four participants, it was relational capabilities (authenticity, listening, visibility, empowerment, and communicative openness) that most clearly distinguished productive from corrosive CEO–TMT relationships. Analytical and business skills, while essential, were described as table stakes rather than differentiators. These observations are consistent with, and extend, established work on emotional intelligence and humble leadership, and are offered as candidate propositions for the doctoral study to test against larger and more diverse samples, including the CEO side of the dyad that is not represented in this pilot.

These insights carry practical implications for how we select, develop, and evaluate CEOs. As organisations navigate increasingly complex and uncertain environments, the ability to build and sustain high-quality relationships at the apex of the organisation may prove to be among the most consequential capabilities a CEO can develop. Understanding what these capabilities look like, from the inside and through the eyes of those who depend on them most, is both a bright idea and, potentially, a source of lasting impact.

The pilot also delivered on its methodological aims. Critical Incident Interviewing was confirmed as a viable and productive method for researching elite C-suite populations, with specific adaptations (modified incident framing, deliberate rapport-building, and minimal neutral probing) identified as improvements to the classical CII protocol. The combination of *in vivo* and descriptive coding proved effective for capturing the affective richness of executive narratives while enabling structured thematic comparison. Together, the conceptual framework, the methodological observations, and the illustrative pilot material lay a robust foundation for the subsequent full-scale doctoral inquiry into CEO–TMT dyadic relationships. The paper is offered in that spirit to the EMS community: a scholar-practitioner contribution at pilot stage, framed conceptually, and oriented towards lasting impact through the deeper inquiry it supports.

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