

Ubuntu and the Inner Leader: Reimagining BANI-Era Leadership

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Abstract

Orientation: As organisations move from the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) world into the vulnerable BANI (Brittleness, Anxiety, Non-linearity and Incomprehensibility) era, established leadership competency models largely built to manage external turbulence are increasingly tested by a different kind of instability; one that is felt internally by leaders before it is seen externally in systems.

Research purpose: This study aims to reposition self-leadership as the precondition for leadership effectiveness. The research sought to answer the question, “How can self-leadership be repositioned as a precondition for effective leadership in the BANI era?”

Motivation for the study: The impetus for this study lies in the need to understand the contribution of Ubuntu and self-leadership to effective leadership in the BANI era.

Research methodology: The study is non-empirical, relying on a review of existing empirical research literature. Insights are also drawn from real-life experiences of individuals, complementing the analysed non-empirical data.

Main findings: This study proposes that Ubuntu supplies the ontological ground missing from self-leadership under BANI, operationalised through the ICA framework. It suggests Ubuntu-grounded interventions may strengthen employee connectedness, cultural integration, and collective responsibility. These propositions are offered as a conceptual contribution, consistent with the study's literature-based design.

Practical implications and contribution: The study highlighted that leadership development should be reframed around Ubuntu-grounded inner leadership rather than external competency training alone, creating a cultural congruence suited to withstanding BANI pressures in organisations. Inner leadership was positioned as a potentially valuable mechanism for HR and OD practices such as coaching, onboarding, and socialisation under the BANI era.

Keywords: Leadership; BANI; Ubuntu; Identity; Communication; Alignment

Introduction

Background and contextualisation of the study

Much of the leadership literature of the past two decades has been shaped by the language of VUCA, with competency models built to help leaders manage external turbulence through strategic agility and adaptive decision-making. More recently, this framing has been argued to no longer adequately describe the conditions many leaders now face. Cascio's (2020) BANI framework offers a more contemporary lens, describing systems that fracture without warning, environments that provoke anxiety amid unpredictable

cause-and-effect relationships, and conditions that resist analysis even under scrutiny. Where VUCA-era models addressed turbulence that could still be planned for (Kruger & Barkhuizen, 2024), BANI conditions are often felt internally by leaders before they appear externally in organisational systems (Du Plessis, 2023). Existing leadership models, oriented primarily toward external competencies, are ill-equipped to explain what internal capacity enables a leader to remain steady and credible under conditions of persistent unpredictability.

This article responds to that gap by arguing that leadership effectiveness under BANI conditions depends not primarily on further external competencies, but on an internal state of readiness that precedes any outward leadership act. Leaders must first lead themselves before they can credibly lead others. To structure this argument, the article draws on the ICA (Identity, Communication and Alignment) Framework. The framework was originally developed through doctoral empirical grounded theory research conducted within a South African construction enterprise (Tshetshe & Viljoen, 2024) and is here repurposed as a self-leadership architecture. Running through all three pillars is Ubuntu philosophy, captured in the phrase "I am because we are". Self-leadership is understood in this article not as individualistic self-optimisation, but as preparation for the self to be fully present and accountable to the collective so that the "we" can, in turn, be well led.

Problem Statement and Rationale for a Non-Empirical Approach

BANI remains a young, rapidly evolving construct, and empirical research into its leadership implications has not yet kept pace with lived organisational experience. Much of the available literature remains conceptual or drawn from adjacent constructs such as VUCA. Waiting for data to accumulate before theorising the internal, self-leadership dimension of BANI-era leadership risks leaving a pressing problem under-theorised in the interim.

This article therefore adopts a non-empirical approach. It entails a desktop review combined with theoretical synthesis. It draws together existing scholarship on BANI, self-leadership and Ubuntu philosophy to build a theoretical proposition that can inform future empirical enquiry. This positions the work as theory-building that comes before, rather than replaces, empirical testing, consistent with the approach taken in Tshetshe's (2025) earlier work, *Recognising 'Being' in the BANI World*.

Research design and methodology

Non-empirical studies typically derive their conclusions from subjective interpretation, shaped by the researcher's observations and engagement with contemporary developments rather than by primary data collection. This study, while not empirical in that sense, is grounded in a comprehensive review of the Ubuntu and BANI literature undertaken to identify themes relevant to the research question. As with any non-empirical inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019), the conclusions drawn are inevitably shaped by the researcher's own ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the validity, acceptability and legitimacy of the knowledge produced.

Literature Review

From VUCA to BANI: Redefining the leadership terrain

Leadership competency models developed over the past two decades were largely designed for conditions of volatility and complexity. While viewed as challenging, they were still analysable and, to some extent, plannable (Cascio, 2020). Such models emphasised strategic agility, scenario planning and adaptive

decision-making as the primary drivers of leadership effectiveness. The emergence of BANI conditions, however, has exposed the limits of this orientation. Bushuyev et al. (2023) observe that the incomprehensibility of BANI environments makes them inherently difficult to grasp and navigate, with conceptual frameworks for understanding them still evolving. They further suggest that the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022 offered support for this inference. This notion implies that competency models premised on analysability are ill-suited to conditions that actively resist being understood.

In a similar vein, a systematic review conducted by Syamsir et al. (2025) traces the shift from VUCA to BANI as a more contemporary leadership lens. The review found that agile leadership models remain predominantly oriented toward external, contextual, and organisational drivers of adaptability, with limited attention given to the internal capacities leaders rely on under such conditions. Further research into BANI-context leadership identifies agility, resilience, transparency and adaptability as the most critical qualities for managerial effectiveness (Cinnioğlu, 2025). Yet these findings largely capture the observable outcomes of effective leadership, rather than what internally sustains a leader in producing them.

Collectively, this literature suggests that while the shift from VUCA to BANI has been increasingly documented, existing competency models have not kept pace with the more internally destabilising demands that BANI places on leaders. This article addresses this gap by turning attention inward, toward self-leadership as a precondition for the external competencies these models describe.

Inner leadership in the BANI world

A growing body of self-leadership scholarship lends support to the claim that leadership effectiveness in BANI conditions rests on an internal state of readiness rather than on external competency alone. For example, Kim, Wang and Williams (2024) demonstrate that self-leadership plays a significant role in enabling human resource development. Their work shows that self-leadership interventions empower individuals to take ownership of their own development in ways that align personal and organisational goals. This finding is significant in that it repositions self-leadership not as a peripheral soft skill, but as a developmental mechanism through which individual growth is deliberately channelled toward organisational outcomes. It suggests that leadership capacity is cultivated from within before it is extended outward to organisational ends.

This internal orientation is reinforced by Krampitz et al. (2023), who frame leadership development as an internal, self-directed process rather than one driven by external, top-down intervention. This reframing bears directly on BANI conditions, where the unpredictability of external systems limits leaders' reliance on established top-down structures or precedent. Instead, leaders are required to draw on internal self-regulatory processes to sustain direction and clarity for those they lead. This implies a shift from the traditional view of externally motivated self-leadership to inner leadership, where internal foundation is emphasised before practical strategies direct behaviour.

A recurring theme in foundational self-leadership scholarship is that leaders pursue two connected aims: cultivating their own authentic development and, in doing so, modelling and encouraging inner leadership in others (Tenschert et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2023). This formulation positions personal development not as an end, but as the necessary precursor to leading others credibly. Authenticity and internal development are treated as prerequisites for, rather than by-products of, effective leadership practice.

Inner leadership as an internal dimension of self-leadership extends beyond authenticity and self-influence to encompass ethical and reflective capacity. Tenschert et al. (2024) find that self-leadership, when

combined with mindfulness training, is associated with greater introspection and ethical judgement. It equips leaders to resolve moral difficulty and maintain integrity under stress. This is a particularly salient finding for BANI conditions. The Anxiety and Incomprehensibility characteristics of the environment often place leaders under sustained pressure to make judgement calls without the benefit of clear precedent or complete information. Taken together, this literature supports the argument that leaders must first lead themselves. This requires attending to the precepts of inner leadership, namely: authenticity, internal alignment, self-influence and ethical grounding. Only then are they equipped to show up and lead others amid the destabilising conditions of the BANI environment.

African Indigenous Knowledge and Ubuntu as a self-leadership epistemology

Ubuntu is a Southern African relational philosophy of personhood, most summarised by the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, directly translated as “a person is a person through other persons” (Gadfly, 2024). Ubuntu evaluates actions according to whether they honour or disrespect relationships and community. Ontologically, Ramose (2002) extends this further, framing Ubuntu as an ontological principle in which Being is dynamic, processual, and relational rather than static. The term gained prominence during South Africa's 1993–1995 transitional period (Gade, 2011), when political leaders including Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and Thabo Mbeki invoked Ubuntu to promote reconciliation, most visibly through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's emphasis on restorative justice (Tutu, 1999).

Ubuntu leadership is a distinctly Afrocentric form of leadership, grounded in humanistic principles that value individual difference, authenticity, and community service (Mangaliso et al., 2021; Sibanda & Grobler, 2023). Such distinction matters for a self-leadership argument because it rules out the assumption that attending to the self is a Western, individualist idea unsuited to African epistemology. Western leadership is usually built on individualism, hierarchy, and efficiency. Ubuntu is built on community, relationship, and shared humanity. This contrast shows what self-leadership means here. It is not self-optimisation. It is self-preparation for the sake of the collective.

For Ubuntu, the self is never self-contained. It only makes sense through relationship with others. *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* makes this claim about Being, not just about ethics. Ubuntu also values collectivism, shared responsibilities, and relational harmony (Sipondo, 2025). These qualities point ahead to the Identity and Alignment pillars discussed next. They make those pillars ethical commitments, not just management tools. Together, this literature shows that self-leadership already belongs to African relational thought. Leading the self and belonging to community are not two separate steps. They are the same act.

Viljoen et al. (2026) refer to Toendepi's Me-We-Us framework, which offers a structurally apt response to BANI conditions because it distributes sense-making and resilience across relationships rather than concentrating them in the cognition of one leader. They posit that, where BANI conditions frustrate individualism in leadership, Ubuntu's founding claim, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“I am because we are”), reframes personal mastery (“Me”) as already relationally constituted. A “fractured self,” as Viljoen et al. note, cannot serve. Inner leadership emerges not through the assertion of an autonomous, bounded self, but through the individual's relational positioning within a web of interdependent others. This relational grounding carries through as direct countermeasures to BANI's pressures.

Practices such as *nhimbe/ukusiza* (“communal work-sharing”) and the maxim that “one finger cannot pick grain” address Nonlinearity and Brittleness through distributed, redundant problem-solving (Mbigi, 2005). Consensus-building (“We”) and mentorship function as load-bearing infrastructure that addresses the

Anxiety element of BANI (Viljoen et al., 2026). At the societal, or “*Us*,” level, particularly in governance and environmental stewardship, Ubuntu responds to incomprehensibility through ethical orientation rather than additional information.

It maintains that responsible action remains possible within a web of interdependent relationships, even when outcomes are uncertain or unpredictable. This positions Ubuntu-based inner leadership as a rigorous, Africa-originated paradigm suited to the conditions BANI describes. What this paradigm still requires is a structure through which it can be practised. The graphical representation below depicts such a structure.

The ICA Framework Reimagined as a Self-Leadership Architecture for BANI

The ICA framework (Identity, Communication, and Alignment), built around the idea of *Being* (Tshetshe & Viljoen, 2024; Tshetshe, 2025), gives self-leadership in the BANI era a ready structure. Read through Ubuntu, each pillar shows how the leader's self is shaped through relationships.

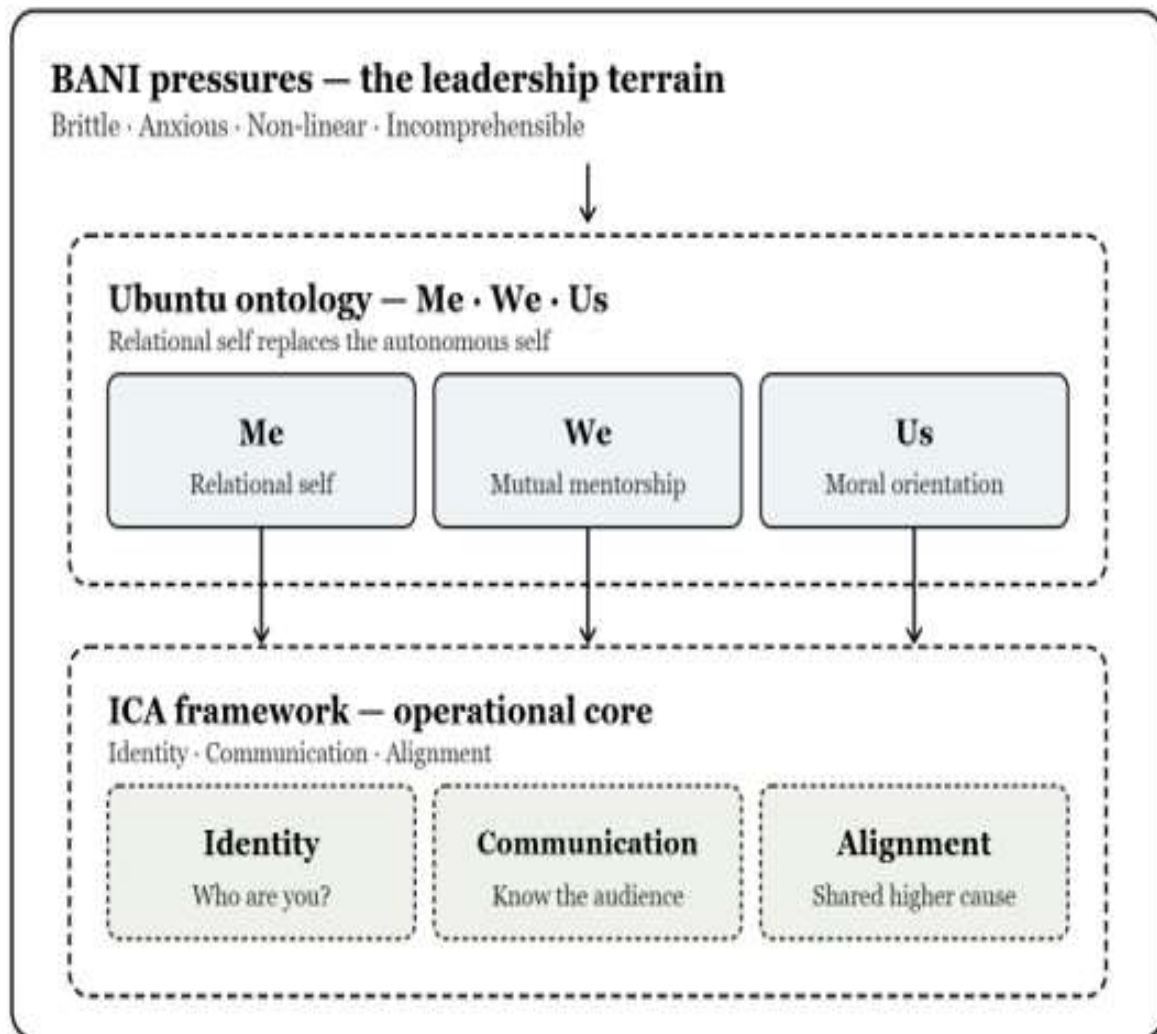
Regarding the Identity pillar of the ICA framework, self-leadership starts with a stable sense of who you are. This holds even when the outside world is volatile. It is the internal anchor that resists BANI's brittleness. When systems break, a leader's identity must not break with them. Tshetshe (2025) frames this grounding through awareness and meaning, the unseen engine behind visible action. Ubuntu explains what that engine actually is. A leader's identity is not just personal readiness. It is shaped through relationships with others and answerable to them. Viljoen et al. (2026) note that “a fractured self cannot serve.” Against Brittleness, this is not just a philosophical point; it is structural. An identity with no relational grounding has nothing to hold it together when the systems around it break.

Under BANI, Communication follows an inside-out approach. A leader must first speak honestly with themselves. This means awareness and reflection. Only then can they communicate clearly and calmly to others, even amid BANI's anxiety and incomprehensibility. Ubuntu favours consensus, respect, and dialogue over top-down transmission. This gives communication its collective character. It becomes relationship in action, not a one-way transfer. What a leader says under pressure only carries weight if it comes from a position already examined within.

As far as the Alignment pillar is concerned, personal alignment precedes alignment with others. A leader's values, purpose, and actions must line up congruently before a team's can. If a leader is internally misaligned, they cannot credibly align a team. This matters most under BANI's non-linear disruption, where cause and effect no longer follow one clear line. Ubuntu reframes alignment. It moves away from simple compliance with a mandate. Instead, it means harmony between self, community, and shared purpose. The leader is accountable to the collective, not just to a directive.

Ubuntu is not a separate analogy appended to this framework. It is the thread that ties all three pillars together. Identity is shaped by community. Communication happens through dialogue. Alignment is shared, not forced from above. In this way, self-leadership in the BANI era is itself an act of Ubuntu. The leader prepares themselves so that the collective can be well led. This echoes *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* as the philosophical spine of the whole framework. Below is a visual representation of the BANI pressures and leadership terrain.

Figure 1: BANI pressures and leadership terrain



The diagram depicts three nested layers explaining how a leader copes with BANI conditions. The outer layer names the environmental pressures: Brittleness, Anxiety, Non-linearity, and Incomprehensibility, conditions under which individually held competency models tend to fail. The middle layer presents Ubuntu's corrective: Me, We, and Us, wherein the self is relationally constituted, sustained through mutual mentorship, and guided by moral rather than purely rational judgement. The inner layer, the ICA framework, operationalises this relational self through Identity, Communication, and Alignment, asking who the leader is, how well they understand those they lead, and whether their contribution serves a shared purpose. Taken as a whole, the diagram argues that coping with BANI requires more than external agility; it requires identity, communication, and alignment to be grounded in a self already understood as relational.

In response to Cascio's (2020) call for more conceptual frameworks to be developed in order to explore solutions to the BANI challenges, an Ubuntu-inspired leadership conceptual framework is developed and

explained below. Figure 2 below shows a more detailed graphical representation that presents a conceptual framework that integrates BANI, Ubuntu, and the ICA framework.

Figure 2: Ubuntu-Inspired Inner Leadership Conceptual Framework

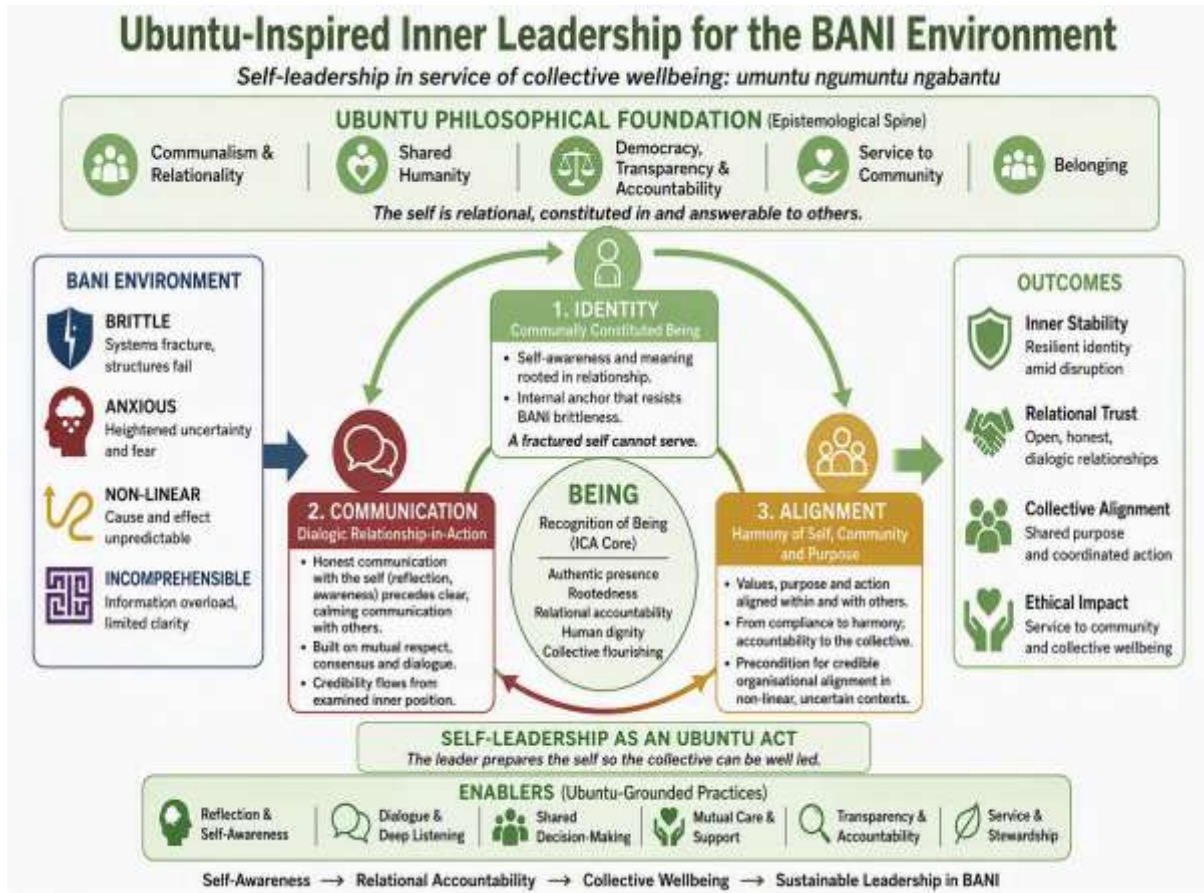


Figure 2 above provides an Ubuntu-Inspired Inner Leadership Conceptual Framework for the BANI environment. The framework proposes that effective leadership in contexts characterised by brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility begins not with external leadership behaviour, but with the cultivation of the self. The framework is grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, which serves as its epistemological foundation and provides an African indigenous understanding of self-leadership. Consistent with the principle of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), the framework conceives the self as inherently relational, constituted through human connection, accountable to the collective, and committed to the wellbeing of others.

At the centre of the framework is Being, drawn from the ICA model (Identity, Communication, and Alignment) developed by Tshetshe and Viljoen (2024). Being represents the ontological core of leadership and refers to authentic presence, self-awareness, relational accountability, human dignity, and collective flourishing. The framework posits that leadership effectiveness in times of uncertainty is not primarily a function of technical competence, but of the quality of the leader's Being. In a BANI environment, where conventional leadership approaches are often insufficient, Being provides the inner grounding from which resilient leadership emerges.

The first pillar, Identity, refers to a leader's sense of self and meaning. Within the Ubuntu worldview, identity is not an individual possession, but a communal construct developed through relationships with

others. Identity functions as an internal anchor against BANI's brittleness. When systems, structures, and institutions become fragile or fail, leaders require a stable and coherent sense of self that is rooted in purpose and relational belonging. Ubuntu therefore reframes identity from individual self-definition to relational self-understanding, where personal meaning is inseparable from service to the community.

The second pillar, Communication, addresses the challenge of anxiety within the BANI environment. The framework conceptualises communication as an inside-out process that begins with self-awareness and reflection before extending to others. Ubuntu emphasises dialogue, mutual respect, listening, and consensus. Consequently, communication is understood not merely as the transmission of information but as the enactment of relationships. Leaders who engage in honest internal dialogue are better positioned to communicate clarity, stability, and reassurance amidst uncertainty. Communication therefore serves as the mechanism through which relational trust is built and sustained.

The third pillar, Alignment, provides a response to the non-linear and unpredictable nature of contemporary organisational life. Alignment refers to the congruence between personal values, purpose, behaviour, and collective goals. In Ubuntu thought, alignment extends beyond compliance with organisational objectives to encompass harmony between self, community, and shared purpose. Leaders who achieve internal alignment are better able to foster organisational cohesion despite complexity and disruption. Alignment therefore transforms accountability from a compliance-driven activity into an ethical commitment to collective wellbeing.

Ubuntu serves as the unifying thread that integrates these three dimensions. Identity is communally constituted, communication is dialogic and relational, and alignment is collectively held rather than externally imposed. Self-leadership is therefore understood as an Ubuntu act, where personal development is undertaken not for individual advancement but to strengthen the capacity to serve others and contribute to collective flourishing. Through this lens, self-leadership and belonging are not separate constructs but mutually reinforcing dimensions of human development.

The framework further proposes a set of enabling practices that support the development of Ubuntu-inspired inner leadership. These include self-reflection, deep listening, shared decision-making, mutual care, transparency, accountability, service, and stewardship. Through these practices, leaders cultivate relational awareness and strengthen their capacity to navigate complexity while maintaining ethical integrity.

The intended outcomes of the framework are inner stability, relational trust, collective alignment, and ethical impact. These outcomes collectively contribute to organisational resilience and sustainable leadership effectiveness within BANI conditions. Ultimately, the framework argues that the most effective response to uncertainty is not greater control over external circumstances, but a deeper cultivation of the self in service of the collective. Ubuntu-inspired inner leadership thus provides a culturally grounded African model for leadership readiness in an increasingly fragile and unpredictable world, as it is the case with the BANI environment.

Implications for Leadership Practice and Development

This paper reveals a need to reframe leadership development programmes to build in structured inner leadership practices grounded in Ubuntu values, rather than only external, individualistic competency training. The findings suggest that Ubuntu-grounded inner leadership serves as a culturally congruent model for leadership readiness in African organisations. This is particularly relevant in high-brittleness sectors where collective wellbeing and communal accountability are integral cultural values. For HR and

OD practitioners, the findings position inner leadership as a valuable mechanism for coaching, onboarding, and organisational socialisation. As belonging is a core tenet of Ubuntu, leadership development interventions grounded in Ubuntu principles may enhance employee connectedness, cultural integration, and collective responsibility across organisational contexts.

Summary, limitations, and recommendations

This study proposes that Ubuntu supplies the ontological ground missing from self-leadership under BANI, operationalised through the ICA framework. It argues for reframing established, externally-oriented responses to BANI pressures by redirecting focus toward the internal dimensions of leadership that prepare a leader to lead others. The findings of this study are limited to the insights derived from the literature analysed and constitute a synthesis of the information identified within the reviewed sources. To ensure academic integrity and to facilitate further research, all literature sources contributing to the conceptual framework have been appropriately cited. It should nonetheless be acknowledged that alternative findings may emerge should future researchers draw upon different literature sources in testing the conceptual framework. It is recommended that further empirical studies be conducted to test whether inner leadership is indeed a valuable mechanism for HR and OD practices such as coaching, onboarding, and socialisation under the BANI era.

Data Availability Statement

The article is grounded in an extensive review of literature. The non-empirical research data analysed is derived from the studies cited in the references section of this paper.

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