Authentic Leadership as a Stabilising Mechanism in Complex Adaptive Systems: Strategic Insights from a High-Uncertainty Governance Case

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, authentic leadership has emerged as a prominent framework for understanding leadership in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Distinct from leadership models grounded in charisma or formal authority, authentic leadership emphasises coherence between personal values, actions, transparency, and trust-based relationships. This paper explores both the theoretical foundations and practical implications of authentic leadership, with a specific focus on its role as a stabilising mechanism within complex adaptive systems (CAS). Drawing on the works of Walumbwa, George, Goffee, and Jones, alongside recent critical perspectives, the study examines the tension between maintaining authenticity and enabling adaptability under sustained uncertainty. Key leadership practices such as situational awareness, calibrated vulnerability, and balanced communication are identified as central to systemic coherence. The empirical analysis is grounded in a qualitative case study of post-2001 Afghanistan, conceptualised as an extreme, high-stress governance environment marked by political instability and organisational fragmentation. The findings support two hypotheses: (H1) leadership style significantly shapes crisis planning, coordination, and control, and (H2) leader authenticity plays a critical role in mitigating crisis effects and fostering organisational resilience. By integrating a CAS perspective, the study reframes authentic leadership not merely as an ethical ideal, but as a systemic process that enables coherence, trust, and adaptive performance. The results offer relevant insights for public management and governance under uncertainty, highlighting authenticity as a strategic resource for organisational resilience.

KEYWORDS: *authentic leadership; complex adaptive systems; resilience; VUCA environments; organisational performance.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *H12; D81.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last couple of decades, authentic leadership has established itself as one of the most promising paradigms for analysing leadership in organisations facing volatility, uncertainty,

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complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). In a global environment marked by health, economic, socio-political, and military crises, organisations increasingly seek leaders who can provide not only direction but also trust, meaning, and stability (Dirks et al., 2021). The authenticity of leadership implies a congruence between a leader's personal values and their concrete actions, which becomes visible in how they relate to their team and address organisational objectives. Unlike models centred on charisma or formal authority, authentic leadership is grounded in principles of transparency, ethics, and responsibility (Helmuth et al., 2023). This paradigm emphasises that leaders are not merely "performance producers," but also agents of social and cultural cohesion, responsible for strengthening the psychological capital of organisations. From a systemic perspective, authentic leadership can be understood as a stabilising factor within complex adaptive systems (CAS). In such systems, performance depends not only on individuals' technical capacity but also on the emergence of relational dynamics that sustain adaptation and collective resilience. Authentic leaders facilitate these processes by reinforcing shared values and cultivating an atmosphere of trust, which in turn enables the development of innovative solutions even during crises. The practical importance of studying authentic leadership becomes clear when analysing teams operating under high pressure – from military units in operational theatres to medical teams or emergency response organisations. In all these contexts, the authenticity of leaders acts as a catalyst for maintaining team functionality and coherence, reducing the risk of fragmentation or organisational failure. Building on these premises, this research aims to examine how authentic leadership contributes to managing organisational and societal crises through a case study focused on post-2001 Afghanistan. The analysis emphasises the interaction among leaders' traits, follower dynamics, and situational context, with the primary goal of demonstrating the importance of authentic leadership in sustaining performance in high-stress environments. This article addresses two key research questions: (RQ1) To what extent does the leadership style adopted influence the planning, organisation, and control of crisis management? (RQ2) How does leader authenticity reduce the adverse effects of crises and foster organisational resilience? These questions are explored through two hypotheses: H1, that leadership style is critical to effective crisis management, and H2, that leader authenticity is a vital factor in building resilience.

This study extends beyond military contexts to explore the wider managerial and governance issues that public and private organisations face in persistent uncertainty. Using a complex adaptive systems perspective on leadership, it addresses decision-makers across fields such as public administration, crisis management, critical infrastructure, healthcare, and large organisations under ongoing stress. The Afghan case is used not merely as a military event, but as an extreme example showing universal patterns of leadership, legitimacy, and systemic resilience applicable to modern management.

2. REVIEW

The potential benefits of authentic leadership outweigh its limitations. In both civilian and military spheres, it has been shown to strengthen trust, foster innovation, sustain morale, and enhance long-term effectiveness. As organisations and military institutions confront environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, authentic leadership emerges not simply as a desirable style, but as a vital mechanism for coherence, resilience, and adaptive performance.

Authentic leadership has been widely recognised as a leadership style that fosters trust, resilience, and cohesion across diverse organisational settings. Defined by self-awareness,

relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalised moral perspective (Ahma, 2024; Almutairi et al., 2024), this model highlights congruence between values and actions, fairness in decision-making, and ethical integrity. These attributes not only enhance individual credibility but also contribute to the performance and sustainability of organisations operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments.

The theoretical roots of authentic leadership are further enriched by Hefner & Becker (2024), who stress the role of biographical narratives in shaping legitimacy, and by Alvesson & Einola (2023), who highlight the relational, non-hierarchical, and situationally adaptive nature of leadership. Steffens et al. (2021) extended this conceptualisation by emphasising leaders' responsiveness to followers' needs for belonging, recognition, authenticity, and enthusiasm, underscoring that authentic leadership is not only a matter of personal identity, but also of community-building and mobilisation.

While these contributions conceptualise authentic leadership in terms of individual traits and relational dynamics, recent scholarship suggests that its full potential can be understood only within the broader framework of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). CAS theory emphasises that organisations – and military units in particular – are dynamic systems composed of interconnected agents whose interactions generate emergent behaviours, often unpredictable and nonlinear (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2022). In such environments, leadership is less about command and control and more about creating conditions that enable self-organisation, adaptation, and resilience.

Authentic leadership aligns closely with this systemic logic. Self-awareness provides leaders with the stability to act consistently, which functions as a point of coherence in turbulent systems. Relational transparency fosters trust and open communication, enhancing the quality of interactions that drive collective adaptation. Balanced processing ensures that decision-making incorporates diverse perspectives, a critical element in systems where no single actor holds all relevant information. The internalised moral perspective anchors leadership in ethical integrity, which stabilises relationships across networks, particularly in times of uncertainty. In short, the four dimensions of authentic leadership can be reframed in CAS terms as mechanisms of network cohesion, distributed influence, emergent adaptability, and ethical stabilisation.

The Afghan theatre of operations provides a compelling empirical setting for applying this perspective. Leaders there were embedded in a web of interactions involving coalition forces, Afghan governmental institutions, tribal communities, insurgent groups, and international NGOs – a textbook example of a CAS. Success depended not solely on hierarchical command, but on the ability to foster trust, legitimacy, and adaptive capacity across interconnected actors. Although the Afghan situation is primarily military, the leadership dynamics seen reflect those found in civilian crises such as public health emergencies, major infrastructure failures, or organisational shifts under institutional stress. The importance of this case is not in its military aspects, but in how strongly it reveals systemic leadership mechanisms.

The Dutch junior officers in Uruzgan, for example, demonstrated that cultural competence and openness to learning were essential for effectiveness in counterinsurgency, illustrating how authentic leadership traits functioned as catalysts for adaptation within a complex and culturally sensitive system (Groen & Moelker, 2021).

In Afghanistan, authentic leadership proved indispensable for navigating the interplay between high-stakes military operations and complex sociocultural dynamics. Self-awareness enables leaders to act with integrity while reconciling personal and organisational values (Dowden, 2022; Zhilicheva, 2023). Relational transparency fostered trust not only within military units, but also with local communities, enhancing operational legitimacy (Ahma, 2024). Balanced processing allowed leaders to evaluate multiple perspectives in volatile contexts, ensuring decisions were informed and adaptive (Almutairi et al., 2024). An internalised moral perspective provided the ethical compass necessary to sustain credibility in the face of dilemmas inherent to war (Ogunyemi & Ogunyemi, 2020).

Two additional attributes – cultural competence and adaptability – emerged as critical. Cultural competence enabled leaders to respect and integrate local traditions into operations, thereby strengthening alliances and reducing friction with Afghan partners (Groen & Moelker, 2021). Adaptability and continuous learning allowed leaders to respond flexibly to unpredictable challenges, aligning with CAS theory's emphasis on emergent problem-solving (Groen & Moelker, 2021).

The effects of authentic leadership in Afghanistan were tangible. It enhanced psychological capital – confidence, resilience, and optimism – sustaining morale in prolonged operations (Antonesei & Făsărea, 2023). Trust and commitment were reinforced, resulting in cohesive units capable of achieving mission success under extreme pressure (Ahma, 2024; Xuan, 2023). Authentic leaders encouraged creativity and innovation, qualities vital to countering insurgent tactics and adapting to shifting conditions (Xuan, 2023). At the organisational level, authentic leadership aligned values with mission objectives, improving readiness and cohesion (Ogunyemi & Ogunyemi, 2020).

The Afghan experience also highlights challenges. The hierarchical nature of military organisations sometimes conflicted with the principles of transparency and open communication that authentic leadership promotes. Moreover, the high-stress environment of military operations posed difficulties in sustaining consistent authenticity. Nevertheless, the evidence underscores that the positive impact of authentic leadership outweighs these limitations. By reinforcing trust, morale, and adaptive capacity, authentic leadership proved not only to be a desirable style but also an essential mechanism to sustain effectiveness in one of the most demanding operational theatres of the 21st century.

Viewed through the combined lenses of leadership theory and CAS, authentic leadership emerges as both a personal and systemic resource. It anchors leaders in their values while enabling adaptability across dynamic networks, ensuring that cohesion, resilience, and innovation are sustained even in volatile and high-stress environments. In Afghanistan, authenticity functioned not merely as an individual trait but as a mechanism for stabilising complex adaptive systems, bridging cultural divides, and enabling effective collective action. Overall, the literature portrays authentic leadership as a relational, situational, and inspirational process that transcends the traditional dichotomy between authority and charisma. It entails value coherence, sensitivity to followers' needs, and constant adaptive capacity. Research published over the past decade, particularly since 2020, confirms that leadership authenticity constitutes not only a theoretical construct but also a critical factor in team performance and organisational resilience in VUCA environments.

3. METHODOLOGY/MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study began with the hypothesis that authentic leadership is a crucial factor in managing crises in complex and highly stressful environments. Rather than adopting a strictly quantitative approach, we employed a qualitative methodology, based on documentary analysis, indirect observation, and unstructured interviews with veterans of the Afghan operational theatre. The selected sources included official reports (NATO, UN, U.S. Congress), academic literature published after 2001, and recent peer-reviewed articles (2020–2023) indexed in international databases.

In addition, the qualitative analysis was informed by a limited number of unstructured interviews with former military personnel who had direct operational experience in Afghanistan. These interviews were used to complement documentary sources and to enrich contextual interpretation, rather than to function as an independent empirical dataset.

The inclusion criteria focused on direct relevance to leadership, crisis management, and complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory. The analysis followed a thematic approach, with information coded along dimensions related to the research hypotheses (leadership type and leader authenticity). Methodological limitations include the lack of direct access to primary data and the inability to make statistical generalisations. Nevertheless, the added value lies in the depth of interpretation and the integration of recent literature with the analysis of a paradigmatic case study.

Accordingly, the methodology assumes an interpretative and narrative character, requiring the integration of contextual and cultural dimensions into the understanding of the phenomenon. The premise was that organisations under crisis function as complex adaptive systems (CAS): outcomes are not determined solely by hierarchies and procedures but emerge from multiple, nonlinear interactions. Within this framework, the authentic leader acts as an "agent of coherence," capable of stabilising the system by consolidating shared values and facilitating sense-making processes.

External validity considerations. The choice of a single case study (post-2001 Afghanistan) limits contextual diversity, and conclusions must be interpreted with caution. The findings can be extrapolated to other organisations and teams operating in environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, and high stress. However, they cannot be applied uniformly to stable civilian contexts or organisations with low levels of ambiguity. Therefore, this research provides exploratory insights rather than definitive generalisations, opening the path for future comparative studies in sectors such as public health, aviation, or civil security.

Sources were selected based on three criteria: (1) direct relevance to leadership theory, crisis management, and complex adaptive systems; (2) publication in peer-reviewed journals or authoritative institutional reports (NATO, UN, U.S. Congress); and (3) coverage of the post-2001 Afghanistan context. The data was thematically coded according to dimensions aligned with the research hypotheses, such as adaptive leadership, authenticity, legitimacy, and systemic resilience. While secondary sources limit access to primary field data, triangulation across multiple types of documents increases reliability.

The methodological choice of a qualitative, single-case design is deliberate and aligned with the exploratory aims of the study. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the research pursues analytical generalisation, using Afghanistan as an extreme and information-rich case to

illuminate leadership mechanisms that become visible only under sustained systemic stress. This approach allows for the identification of transferable patterns relevant to management and governance in complex, high-pressure environments.

3.1 Methodological stages

Indirect observational analysis involved collecting data from official and academic sources, as well as accounts from former Afghan veterans, to examine leadership and team behaviours. These insights were analysed using authentic leadership and complexity theories. The documentary analysis included official reports (NATO, U.S. Government, UN), academic publications, and post-2001 literature, with recent peer-reviewed studies (published after 2020) linking authenticity to team performance during crises.

This approach supported a diachronic understanding of historical development and critiqued field leadership styles. The study was guided by three conceptual frameworks: authentic leadership (Westover, 2025; Kasali, 2024) - emphasising self-awareness, transparency, balanced information processing, and moral perspective; complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory - explaining team and organisational self-organisation in stressful, uncertain environments; and the VUCA paradigm (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), used to analyse crises and how authentic leaders provide stability.

3.2 Methodological limitations

As a qualitative study, the results are not statistically generalisable. However, the strength of this methodology lies in its interpretative depth and ability to explore emergent leadership dynamics. Using a single case study (post-2001 Afghanistan) limits contextual diversity but offers a detailed and challenging environment for testing hypotheses. This approach transforms the methodology from just analytical tools into a reflexive framework for understanding authentic leadership as an emerging process within complex and tense systems.

4. THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEADERSHIP: REINTERPRETING CORE DIMENSIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS

Leadership is among the most examined and discussed topics in modern social sciences. From trait-based to transformational and distributed theories, research has repeatedly sought to understand how leaders affect organisational outcomes and social harmony (Northouse, 2021). In this context, Eftenaru (2024) is notable for highlighting the relational and contextual aspects of leadership, providing an alternative to models that focus solely on authority or charisma.

Their framework is built on three interconnected foundations: the relational, the non-hierarchical, and the situational. While these serve as applicable starting points, applying them to complex organisations or stressful environments raises questions. A more appropriate perspective is offered by the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), which views organisations as dynamic, interconnected networks that adapt and change within volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) settings (Westover, 2024).

4.1 The Three Foundations of Leadership

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, originally sociologists, explored the importance of authenticity in leadership and highlighted new leadership dynamics when managing highly intelligent tech workers. They identify three key foundations: authenticity, which involves staying true to one's values; the ability to cultivate a sense of community by building connections among

team members; and the capacity to articulate a clear purpose that guides everyone toward a common goal. These foundations are essential for effective leadership, as they help leaders engage and inspire their followers, ultimately enhancing organisational performance and fostering a positive work environment. (Hefner & Becker, 2024).

Secondly, leadership is non-hierarchical. Unlike traditional views that place leadership at the top, Goffee and Jones believe it can occur at multiple levels, validated by authenticity and voluntary acknowledgment within a community. This aligns with distributed leadership theory (Hefner & Becker, 2024; Harris et al., 2022), which views influence as an emergent process involving diverse actors across networks. Thirdly, leadership is situational. Authentic leaders adjust their behaviour to fit circumstances and team needs, balancing strategy with identity. This resonates with situational leadership theory (Westover, 2024), which emphasises that flexibility should remain rooted in core values. In the context of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), these principles are systemic: the leader–follower bond fosters network cohesion, non-hierarchical structures reflect emergent distributed influence, and adaptability signifies emergent responses. Goffee and Jones' framework complements complexity perspectives, envisioning leadership as orchestrating conditions that support self-organisation and resilience, rather than command and control (Westover, 2024).

4.2 Tensions and Essential Practices in Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership involves ongoing internal tensions, as leaders balance their personal values with organisational demands. Helmuth, Cole, and Vendette (2023) emphasise that authenticity is not about rigidity, but rather about maintaining a stable core identity while adapting communication and actions to changing contexts. This creates what Massoudi (2022) calls "situational chameleons", leaders who shift their style without compromising their core principles. Genuine success comes from calibrated authenticity – remaining true to oneself while being flexible (Williams, 2023). Key practices include acting as perceptive observers of organisational dynamics, listening actively, interpreting emotions, and selectively sharing vulnerabilities to build trust while keeping some mystery (Massoudi, 2022; Williams, 2023). Maintaining a balance between closeness and distance – empathy fosters connections, but boundaries preserve authority (Williams, 2023). Effective communication, tailored to the audience and context, helps articulate visions and foster a sense of belonging, shaping the organisational reality (Serrat, 2021; Leroy et al., 2021). Authentic leadership is cyclical; leaders continually redefine their authenticity through experience, crisis, and reflection, echoing John Donahoe's view that "life is a cycle" (Helmuth et al., 2023). Authenticity is a process of ongoing becoming, not a fixed trait.

4.3 The Stages of the Authentic Leader's Journey

The literature frequently frames authentic leadership as a developmental journey. Hefner and Becker (2024) describe three broad stages: formation, maturation, and contribution.
The formation stage, typically occurring during the first few decades of life, is characterised by exploration, experimentation, and the development of identity. Frequent job changes and diverse experiences help clarify personal values (Hefner & Becker, 2024).

The maturation stage is marked by significant trials – organisational crises, personal challenges, or moments of reevaluation – that test and transform authenticity. Jeff Immelt, former CEO of General Electric, referred to this as "hitting the wall," when leaders confront realities that force them to reassess their convictions and redefine their direction ("Leadership in a VUCA World", 2023). Successful navigation of this stage deepens authenticity and converts adversity into wisdom and inspiration.
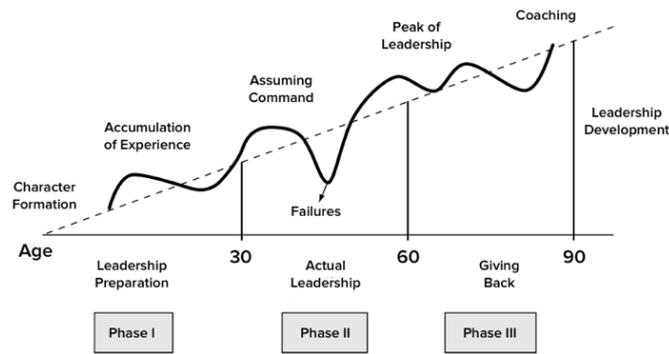
Figure 1. The stages of the authentic leader's journey
Source: "Leadership in a VUCA World", 2023

The contribution stage does not signal retirement, but rather a reorientation of one's role. Leaders choose to share accumulated experience through mentoring, teaching, or community engagement. Lord John Browne, former CEO of British Petroleum, argued against retirement as withdrawal, advocating instead for continued active involvement ("Leadership in a VUCA World", 2023).

This triadic journey – formation, maturation, and contribution – is illustrated in Figure 1. Though the path varies by individual, authenticity remains the central thread: discovery in youth, transformation in maturity, and mentorship in later life ("Leadership in a VUCA World", 2023).

4.4 Complex Adaptive Systems and Military Leadership
The principles of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) offer a valuable framework for transforming leadership development in military organisations. As sociotechnical systems, the armed forces operate in environments marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and interconnectedness (Walker et al., 2024). Traditional hierarchical models, while effective for command and control, can limit adaptability and responsiveness in such dynamic settings. Incorporating CAS principles enables military organisations to foster adaptability, resilience, and decentralised decision-making, promoting innovation, collaboration, and effective action in complex defence landscapes (Mayer, 2023).

A key implication of CAS is the necessity to move from strict authority hierarchies to more decentralised decision-making. For instance, intent-based leadership (IBL) redistributes authority by allowing subordinates to make decisions in line with the commander's intent, rather than waiting for explicit instructions. This method improves autonomy, accountability, and critical thinking within military teams, while also boosting flexibility in rapidly changing scenarios (Dragomir, 2024). The Cynefin model provides a practical guide for tailoring decision strategies to the system's nature – whether it is obvious, complicated, complex, or chaotic. By encouraging leaders to adapt their approaches to the situation, the model fosters collaboration and innovation in complex settings (Young & Enright, 2024).

In addition to decentralisation, adaptive leadership is fundamental for CAS-oriented development. It enables military organisations to respond effectively to uncertainty by promoting experimentation, learning from early implementations, and fostering continuous improvement (Dunn, 2020). The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into defence

decision-making highlights the need for adaptability. From a CAS perspective, AI creates systemic interdependencies that require leaders to leverage technological potential while managing risks like bias, unintended consequences, or over-reliance on algorithms (Osoba, 2024).

Equally important is recognising the value of collaborative and emergent leadership. CAS theory emphasises self-organisation, coevolution, and emergent behaviours as key mechanisms for adaptation. Military leaders should encourage conditions that foster creativity and collective intelligence, rather than relying solely on control-based mechanisms (Southern, 2020). Complexity leadership frameworks also highlight distributed cognition, where leadership is shared and knowledge is collectively built. These practices are vital in volatile environments demanding continuous innovation and resilience (Walker et al., 2024). Another aspect of CAS in military leadership is the adoption of systems thinking and networked mindsets. Viewing organisations as interconnected networks helps leaders recognise interdependencies, promote diverse perspectives, and support decentralised experimentation (Westover, 2024). Systems thinking also fosters transparency and bottom-up coordination, facilitating emergent collaboration crucial in joint and multinational operations. Developing networked mindsets through cross-functional teams and open information flows enhances leaders' ability to navigate complexity and drive change (Westover, 2024).

Finally, transpersonal leadership closely aligns with the CAS principles. It focuses on serving the greater good rather than individual ego, relying on values, emotional intelligence, and openness to new ideas. In military settings, transpersonal leadership enhances resilience, helping individuals and units adapt effectively to complex situations (Young & Enright, 2024).

Although applying CAS principles offers many benefits, it also presents challenges. Traditional hierarchical norms may resist decentralisation and adaptive practices, requiring cultural and structural changes. Additionally, integrating AI and digital tools must be carefully managed to prevent risks such as deskilling or over-dependence on automation (Osoba, 2024; Dragomir, 2024).

Nevertheless, adopting CAS perspectives provides a pathway for military organisations to develop more resilient, adaptive, and innovative leadership. By combining decentralisation, adaptive capacity, systems thinking, and transpersonal values, leaders can better prepare their institutions to succeed in the face of the complexities of modern warfare and global security challenges.

5. CASE STUDY: AFGHANISTAN POST-2001

From a management perspective, post-2001 Afghanistan is a large-scale governance system involving multiple actors operating under high uncertainty. The interplay among international institutions, local authorities, informal power networks, and external stakeholders reflects the complexity that modern public organisations encounter when managing crises across political, social, and economic spheres.

The crisis in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks serve as a key example for understanding leadership in high-pressure situations. Led by al-Qaeda and supported by the Taliban, which had long provided refuge to extremist groups, the attacks triggered a significant military response from the U.S. and its allies under Operation

Enduring Freedom. While the initial goal was to quickly defeat the Taliban and break apart terrorist networks, the true challenge soon shifted to governance, establishing legitimacy, and rebuilding a country ravaged by years of conflict (Witte, 2023).

From a leadership perspective, Afghanistan illustrates that crisis management goes beyond military action alone. It highlights how leadership influences resilience and adaptability at organisational and societal levels. The ability of leaders to foster trust, keep cohesion, and navigate complex political and cultural landscapes significantly shaped the success of stabilisation efforts.

Thus, the Afghan case is viewed not just as a series of historical events but as an empirical test for two hypotheses: first, that the leadership style is crucial in crisis planning, organisation, and control (H1), and second, that genuine leadership plays a vital role in minimising crisis impacts and strengthening organisational resilience (H2).

5.1 The Social and Military Framework of Post-2001 Afghanistan

The evolution of Afghanistan after 2001 can be better understood through successive phases, each influencing leadership styles and authenticity. From 2001 to 2003, the regime's collapse of the Taliban, driven by U.S. and coalition pressure supported by the Northern Alliance, highlighted adaptive leadership that combined military strength with local alliances. However, it also showed the limitations of a force-based approach for long-term reconstruction. Between 2003 and 2009, as NATO assumed control of ISAF and expanded its role, leadership required a hybrid civil-military strategy. Trust and authenticity became vital for legitimacy; where leaders fostered these qualities, stability improved, but their absence led to alienation. From 2010 to 2014, security responsibilities shifted to Afghan forces, exposing tensions between Western strategies and local realities. Leaders who mediated effectively maintained fragile stability, while rigid leadership failed. Between 2015 and 2020, institutional legitimacy declined, and peace talks began tentatively. Despite reduced international presence and increased diplomacy, the process remained fragile without authentic, coherent leadership capable of uniting diverse groups around shared values.
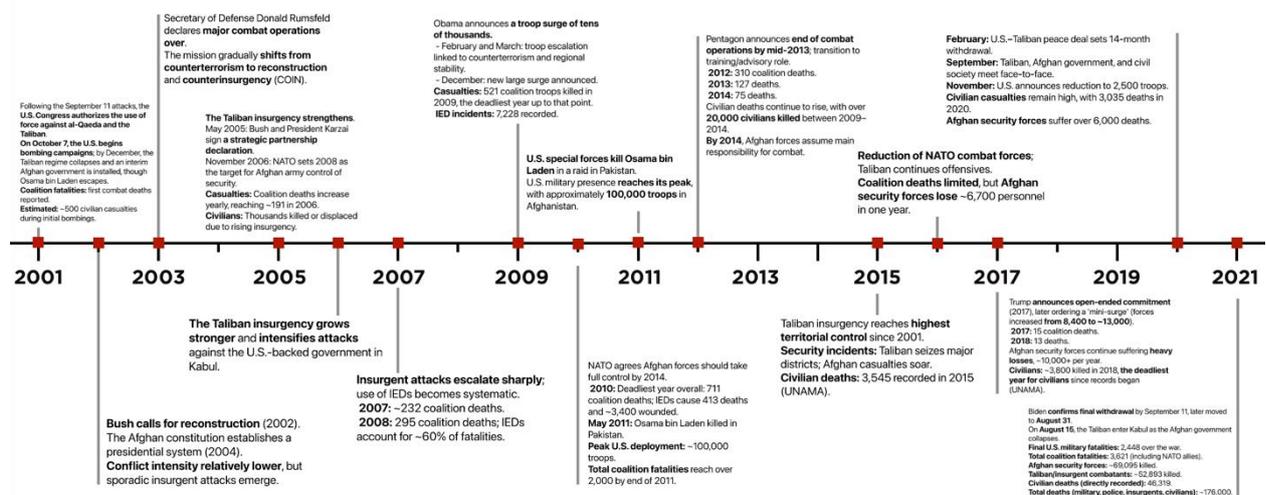

Figure 2. Key political and military events in Afghanistan, 2001-2021
(illustrating dynamics relevant to hypotheses H1 and H2)

Finally, in 2021, the rapid collapse of Afghan institutions following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces resulted in chaotic evacuations from Kabul and the Taliban's return to power. This dramatic outcome highlighted the consequences of leadership failures: without authenticity, both locally and internationally, an already fragile system could not withstand the pressures of uncertainty and conflict. Reflecting on it, the Afghan experience shows that the initial successes of the intervention were driven by adaptive and collaborative leadership. At the same time, the later failures came from rigid, inconsistent, and inauthentic approaches. In this way, Afghanistan serves not only as a historical case, but also as a laboratory for understanding the systemic dynamics of authentic leadership within complex adaptive systems.

5.2 Military and Political Dynamics
Since October 2001, the United States and its allies have launched operations against Taliban and al-Qaeda positions. The initial campaign, supported by precision air strikes and cooperation with the Northern Alliance, quickly defeated Kabul and ousted Taliban leaders (Blanchette, 2021). By December 2001, the Taliban regime had fallen, seemingly confirming the effectiveness of swift military action. However, the rapid military success concealed the complexities that would soon emerge. The shift from defeating the Taliban to rebuilding the Afghan state highlighted the importance of leadership. NATO's decision in 2003 to take command of ISAF reflected the understanding that stabilisation required more than military force; it needed leaders capable of rallying diverse coalitions, engaging with local actors, and establishing legitimacy (Witte, 2023). In this context, H1 is supported: the style of leadership adopted influenced not only immediate military results, but also the long-term prospects for governance and peace. Leaders who demonstrated adaptability, cultural awareness, and inclusiveness were more likely to succeed in forming partnerships with Afghan authorities and maintain some legitimacy. Conversely, approaches relying purely on rigid hierarchical structures and bureaucratic models fostered alienation among Afghan partners and coalition troops alike. These dynamics confirm that the type of leadership – whether adaptive and genuine or rigid and imposed – was crucial to managing crises effectively (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2022).

5.3 Leadership and Soldier Motivation
A crucial aspect of leadership in Afghanistan was its impact on the motivation of the soldiers. Research indicates that in combat, soldiers are rarely driven by ideology or abstract political objectives. Instead, their motivation stems from loyalty to comrades, respect for leaders, and a wish to preserve their reputation within the unit (Kropadze, 2022; Siebold, 2024). In Afghanistan, this was reflected in the cohesion of small units. Genuine leaders—those who displayed fairness, consistency, and empathy—could uphold morale even under intense stress. Their credibility, based on consistency between words and actions, built trust and decreased attrition. Conversely, leaders perceived as manipulative or inconsistent erode morale, increasing the likelihood of dysfunction and desertion. Therefore, H2 is validated: leader authenticity served as a safeguard against the psychological and operational strains of extended conflict. This supports recent research that highlights a positive link between authentic leadership, psychological safety, and collective resilience in high-pressure situations (Leroy et al., 2021; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021).

5.4 Cultural Dimension and Authenticity
The Afghan society exhibits unique cultural dynamics that significantly influence leadership effectiveness. Collectivism, tribal loyalty, and paternalistic structures are central to the

Afghan social fabric (Rasuly-Paleczek, 2021). In this context, authenticity is understood not just as personal sincerity, but as aligning with community values and norms.

Leaders who respected these cultural aspects and engaged with communities in accordance with local traditions were seen as legitimate and trustworthy. For example, coalition commanders who built relationships with tribal elders and respected Islamic customs managed to gain cooperation. Conversely, leaders who attempted to enforce Western governance models without cultural adjustments encountered resistance and a loss of legitimacy (Jansen & Delahaij, 2020).

This affirms H2: leader authenticity should be understood in relational and contextual terms. Authentic Afghan leaders were those who could reconcile their personal values with the cultural frameworks of their communities. This form of situational authenticity supports Turman's (2023) critique that authenticity must be continuously negotiated and cannot be understood outside of its context.

5.5 Afghanistan as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS)

Viewed through the lens of complexity theory, post-2001 Afghanistan operated as a complex adaptive system (CAS). The interaction among international coalitions, Afghan government institutions, tribal communities, insurgent groups, and NGOs formed a system marked by emergence, unpredictability, and nonlinearity (Ångström, 2024; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2020). In such systems, leadership effectiveness cannot be explained solely through hierarchical command. Leaders must act as agents of coherence, capable of stabilising networks and enabling adaptation. Authentic leaders, by building trust and promoting open communication, fostered conditions for self-organisation and problem-solving at the team level (Westover, 2024). The idea of adaptive space (Uhl-Bien, 2021) is especially relevant. Leaders who bridged traditional tribal governance with modern institutional frameworks created adaptive spaces where innovation and cooperation could happen. Authenticity was essential for opening these spaces; only leaders perceived as credible and value-driven could facilitate dialogue across divergent expectations. Therefore, both H1 and H2 are confirmed: the style of leadership (hierarchical versus adaptive) and leader authenticity influenced the system's ability to maintain resilience and coherence amid extreme uncertainty.

5.6 Lessons Learned and Implications for the Hypotheses

The Afghan case provides several critical lessons for the study of leadership in crisis contexts.

First, regarding H1, the evidence shows that the type of leadership adopted was decisive in shaping the outcomes. Adaptive, situational, and relational approaches contributed to stabilising operations, while rigid and authority-centred strategies fostered resistance and inefficiency.

Second, about H2, authenticity emerged as a critical determinant of resilience. Authentic leaders inspire trust, maintain psychological safety, and foster cohesion, thereby mitigating the negative impact of protracted conflict. Their authenticity facilitated adaptation and sustained mission performance despite volatility and uncertainty (Leroy et al., 2021).

Ultimately, integrating CAS perspectives enhances the analysis, demonstrating that leadership in Afghanistan cannot be fully understood without considering systemic interactions and emergent dynamics. Authentic leadership, viewed through the lens of

complexity, does not appear as a static trait but as a dynamic process of creating coherence and enabling adaptation in turbulent environments.

5.7 Discussions and Results
The analysis of the Afghan case provides strong evidence supporting both hypotheses. The first hypothesis, which claimed that the type of leadership chosen is crucial in planning, organising, and controlling crisis management, is consistently backed by both scholarly literature and real-world observations. In environments marked by volatility and pressure, leadership that relies solely on hierarchical command has proven to be inadequate. Instead, adaptive and relational leadership – sensitive to cultural and situational factors – has shown a greater ability to foster cohesion and achieve sustainable outcomes. In Afghanistan, the most effective leaders were those who combined operational skills with cultural awareness and the ability to earn trust, both within their units and among local partners.

The case also confirms the validity of the second hypothesis, which highlighted authenticity as a key factor in reducing the adverse effects of crises and promoting resilience. Leaders perceived as authentic – those whose words and actions aligned, and who demonstrated empathy and integrity – were more successful at maintaining morale and psychological safety among their teams. Authenticity acted as a stabilising force, buffering against the psychological and operational stresses of prolonged conflict. Conversely, leaders perceived as manipulative or inconsistent erode trust and increase organisational vulnerability.

These findings align with current research, which indicates that authentic leadership is strongly correlated with team cohesion, trust, and resilience under pressure (Leroy et al., 2021; Jansen & Delahaij, 2020). Furthermore, the Afghan case highlights the systemic aspect of authenticity: it is not merely an individual trait, but a relational and contextual process. Authentic leaders were those who could align their personal values with the cultural frameworks of Afghan communities, thereby creating conditions conducive to cooperation and adaptive problem-solving.

From the standpoint of complex adaptive systems, these dynamics demonstrate that leadership cannot be reduced to individual traits or rigid structures. Afghanistan functioned as a nonlinear system, where outcomes resulted from numerous interactions between international coalitions, local institutions, tribal communities, insurgent groups, and civil society. In such systems, authentic leaders acted as facilitators of coherence, building trust, and fostering adaptive spaces that allowed for innovation and collaboration.

In summary, the Afghan case confirms that both leadership style and authenticity have a direct influence on the system's ability to adapt and endure under extreme conditions. Adaptive, authentic, and culturally sensitive leadership created moments of stability and resilience, while rigid and inauthentic leadership hastened fragmentation and collapse.

Although this study focuses on the Afghan context, similar patterns are observable in other crises. For example, research on the Iraq War (2003–2011) also highlights the importance of adaptive leadership and local legitimacy in ensuring mission success. Likewise, studies of healthcare organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasise that leader authenticity is a key factor in promoting psychological safety and team resilience (Uhl-Bien, 2021; Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). This suggests that these findings could be relevant across different sectors beyond the military.

5.8 Managerial and Governance Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications for managers and public decision-makers operating in complex and volatile environments. First, leadership effectiveness under sustained stress appears less dependent on formal authority and more on the capacity to generate trust, coherence, and shared meaning across diverse stakeholders. Second, authenticity emerges not as a personal virtue alone, but as a managerial resource that stabilises organisational dynamics and supports adaptive decision-making. Third, organisations facing prolonged uncertainty – such as public administrations, emergency services, healthcare systems, or critical infrastructure operators – may benefit from leadership development approaches that integrate ethical consistency, situational awareness, and systemic thinking. In this sense, authentic leadership functions as a governance mechanism that enhances resilience by enabling coordination, legitimacy, and collective sensemaking.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that authentic leadership represents a critical resource for sustaining organisational performance and resilience in high-stress environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. By examining the post-2001 Afghanistan case through the combined lenses of authentic leadership theory and complex adaptive systems, the analysis shows that leadership effectiveness under prolonged pressure depends less on formal authority and procedural control, and more on the ability to generate trust, coherence, and shared meaning across diverse actors. Leaders who act with ethical consistency, relational transparency, and situational awareness are better positioned to maintain psychological safety, preserve cohesion, and support adaptive responses when systems are exposed to sustained disruption.

A central theoretical contribution of this paper lies in reframing authentic leadership as a dynamic process of adaptive sensemaking within complex systems. Rather than conceptualising authenticity as a fixed personal attribute, the findings suggest that it functions as a systemic mechanism through which organisations stabilise interactions, align values, and enable collective adaptation. In complex adaptive systems, authenticity contributes to resilience not by eliminating uncertainty, but by providing a coherent interpretative framework that allows individuals and groups to navigate ambiguity without organisational fragmentation. From this perspective, authentic leaders act as agents of coherence, facilitating sense-making processes that support emergent coordination and sustained performance.

The empirical insights derived from the Afghan case extend beyond the military domain. For public administrations, emergency services, healthcare systems, and organisations responsible for critical infrastructure, the findings highlight the importance of leadership approaches that combine ethical integrity with contextual adaptability. In such settings, authentic leadership emerges as a governance resource that enhances legitimacy, coordination, and institutional resilience, particularly when formal structures and routines are insufficient to manage complexity. Integrating complexity-informed leadership development may therefore help organisations cultivate leaders capable of balancing stability and change while operating under persistent uncertainty.

At the same time, this research is subject to several limitations. The reliance on secondary sources and a single, context-specific case restricts the scope of empirical generalisation, and the cultural and political particularities of Afghanistan may not be directly transferable to

more stable organisational environments. Nevertheless, the use of an extreme and information-rich case enables analytical generalisation by revealing leadership dynamics that become visible only under sustained systemic stress. These limitations point toward the need for future comparative studies across sectors such as public health, civil security, aviation, or crisis governance, as well as for the development of empirical instruments capable of capturing authenticity as a relational and systemic phenomenon.

By reframing authentic leadership as an adaptive sensemaking process within complex adaptive systems, this study contributes to contemporary debates in management and economics concerning governance under uncertainty, institutional resilience, and the human foundations of organisational performance.

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