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Beyond Self-Rating Leadership: A 360-Degree Audit Architecture for Evidence-Based Executive Maturity Assessment

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Abstract
Leadership assessment often privileges self-perception or superior appraisal, even though executive conduct is experienced differently by peers, employees, clients, partners and institutional stakeholders. This paper develops a 360-degree audit architecture for evidence-based executive maturity assessment using the Total Leadership Index (TLI). Unlike conventional multi-source feedback, the proposed architecture does not treat ratings as interchangeable opinions. It preserves source visibility, links scores to observable behaviour and documentary evidence, assigns a separate evidence-confidence grade, fixes role-sensitive weights before data collection, and embeds confidentiality, consent, non-retaliation, calibration and due-process controls. The study follows a conceptual-methodological framework-development approach and integrates literature on multi-source feedback, self-other agreement, performance assessment, sustainable leadership, organizational resilience and succession governance. The resulting model specifies five rater categories, a standard 25-20-25-20-10 weighting structure, source-specific evidence standards, moderation rules, red-flag handling and an implementation cycle for corporations, SMEs, entrepreneurial ventures, project organizations and public institutions. The paper's principal contribution is to reframe 360-degree feedback from a developmental survey into a governed audit of executive impact across four maturity domains: decision stillness, temporal precision, structured reflection and governed speech. The architecture is positioned as a mechanism for strengthening leadership succession, resilient execution, stakeholder trust and long-term organizational sustainability. Because the model is conceptual, no empirical effectiveness claims are made; a staged validation agenda is proposed for psychometric testing, inter-rater reliability, fairness, predictive validity and longitudinal development outcomes.

Keywords: 360-degree feedback; multi-source feedback; leadership audit; executive maturity; Total Leadership Index; evidence governance; self-other agreement; rater calibration; succession planning; sustainable leadership; organizational resilience; entrepreneurial organizations.

Introduction

Leadership is routinely evaluated through a narrow observational window. Superiors see delivery, escalation and formal alignment; peers see coordination and interface conduct; employees experience daily pressure, fairness and communication; clients and stakeholders experience credibility, responsiveness and transparency; leaders themselves experience intention, effort and constraint. Each view is legitimate, but none is complete. The central measurement problem is therefore not the absence of information; it is the absence of a governed architecture capable of combining different forms of information without erasing their meaning.

The problem becomes more consequential in entrepreneurial, project-based and sustainability-oriented organizations. Founders may be celebrated for vision while employees experience ambiguity and repeated priority shifts. A technically strong project director may satisfy a sponsor while transferring unmanaged urgency to the team. A family-business successor may be accepted by ownership but distrusted by non-family managers and external partners. In such contexts, self-rating and superior-only appraisal can create an upwardly polished but systemically incomplete account of executive maturity.

Multi-source or 360-degree feedback was designed to broaden the evidence field and improve self-awareness. However, the practice often remains vulnerable to rater leniency, fear, rivalry, cultural power distance, weak confidentiality, mechanical averaging and the assumption that all sources observe the same construct in the same way. Research continues to show that self-other agreement matters for development outcomes and that ratings from

different sources should not be combined without understanding source effects (Nielsen et al., 2022; van Lill & van der Merwe, 2022). Reviews also caution that multi-source systems may lack consistent psychometric quality and may not generate sustained behavioural change unless feedback is embedded in a credible development process (Ashworth et al., 2021).

This paper addresses these limitations by developing an evidence-based 360-degree audit architecture around the Total Leadership Index (TLI). The TLI conceptualizes executive maturity through four domains: Decision Stillness, Temporal Precision, Structured Reflection and Governed Speech. The present paper does not attempt to re-establish the full TLI construct. Its narrower purpose is to specify how evidence for those domains can be gathered, weighted, protected, calibrated and translated into development and governance action.

The proposed architecture differs from a conventional feedback survey in six respects. It preserves rater-category visibility; requires behaviour-linked evidence; separates the leadership score from the confidence of the evidence base; establishes weighting ex ante; treats confidentiality and non-retaliation as measurement controls; and introduces moderated interpretation before any result is used for coaching, succession, certification or institutional action. The model therefore combines the developmental value of 360-degree feedback with the procedural discipline of audit design.

The paper also strengthens the sustainability relevance of leadership assessment. Sustainable leadership is not only a normative orientation toward long-term value; it requires structures, routines, social relationships and governance controls that preserve organizational capacity across shocks and leadership transitions (Boeske & Murray, 2022; Baird et al., 2023; Eustachio et al., 2023). An evidence-based audit can contribute by identifying hidden pressure transfer, weak coordination, decision instability and communication risks before they become succession failures, talent loss, stakeholder distrust or resilience deficits.

Figure 1. Evidence-based 360° executive maturity audit architecture. Source: Authors' conceptualization.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Positioning

2.1 Limits of self-rating and single-source appraisal

Self-assessment is indispensable for reflection, but it is an unstable foundation for high-stakes leadership judgment. Leaders possess privileged access to intention and constraint, yet others possess privileged access to impact. A leader may sincerely perceive calmness while the team experiences rapid reversals and pressure transfer. The resulting self-other gap is not merely a measurement error; it may reveal differences in visibility, self-awareness, standards or relational consequences.

Single-source appraisal has a parallel limitation. Superior ratings can preserve accountability for mandate and performance, but they may overrepresent upward compliance and visible outcomes. Recent evidence indicates that self and managerial ratings can show meaningful mean differences even where the underlying performance structure is similar, which supports treating sources separately rather than aggregating them reflexively (van Lill & van der Merwe, 2022). The appropriate response is not to declare one source correct. It is to interpret each source within the behaviours it can reasonably observe.

2.2 360-degree feedback: developmental value and design limitations

Multi-source feedback broadens self-awareness, reveals blind spots and can support behaviour change when accompanied by coaching, psychological safety and follow-through. Classic reviews and meta-analytic work suggest that improvement after multi-source feedback is possible but not automatic; acceptance, goal setting, perceived credibility and an enabling feedback environment influence outcomes (Smither et al., 2005).

More recent work reinforces both the value and the limits of the method. Behery (2022), using data from organizations in the United Arab Emirates, linked multi-rater performance management with organizational outcomes while emphasizing that cultural orientations such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance shape how systems are interpreted. Nielsen et al. (2022) demonstrated that self-other agreement affected how leaders and followers perceived behavioural change after leadership training. Das and Rajini (2024) reported an organizational intervention in Indian infrastructure projects in which systematic coaching and a development-focused use of multi-rater feedback were associated with improvement in lower-rated competencies. Collectively, these studies support the use of 360-degree methods, but they also show that the instrument alone is insufficient.

Ashworth et al. (2021) highlight recurring psychometric and implementation problems, including inconsistent validity, reliability and evidence of sustained change. Bracken et al. (2016) similarly describe the evolution and, in some settings, devolution of 360-degree feedback when it becomes routine, politically managed or disconnected from development. The central implication is that more raters do not automatically create more truth. Architecture, safeguards and interpretation determine whether multi-source data become developmental intelligence or institutional noise.

2.3 Self-other agreement, source effects and observability

Different rater groups may evaluate different manifestations of the same nominal competency. A superior may assess strategic communication through board papers, while employees assess communication through instruction clarity and review tone. A client may observe commitment reliability but not internal reflection. Source disagreement can therefore represent genuine role-specific impact rather than unreliability alone.

The proposed architecture adopts an observability principle: a source should carry weight only for behaviours it has meaningful opportunity to observe. It further adopts a non-collapse principle: source differences should remain visible in reporting. A high total average can conceal a serious split profile—for example, strong superior confidence combined with low team experience of fairness and pressure containment. In an audit context, that pattern is more informative than the average.

2.4 Evidence governance, calibration and ethical safeguards

Evidence governance connects a rating to the assessment period, behaviour, source visibility, context, consequence and corroborating material. It does not require surveillance or exhaustive documentation. It requires proportionality: the higher the stakes of the decision, the stronger the evidence and procedural safeguards should be. Developmental coaching may rely on aggregated patterns and narrative examples; succession certification may require stronger documentation, confidence thresholds and review rights. Calibration disciplines judgment without pretending to eliminate it. Rater training, behavioural anchors, exposure screening, source-specific items and moderated interpretation can reduce leniency, severity, halo, fear and recency effects. Ethical safeguards are equally central. Confidentiality, category suppression, comment masking, secure access, non-retaliation and leader due process are not ancillary HR practices. They determine whether respondents can speak truthfully and whether the assessed leader is protected from unsupported allegation.

2.5 Sustainable leadership, resilience and succession

The relevance of an evidence-based leadership audit extends beyond individual development. Sustainability leadership research increasingly emphasizes the interaction between leadership behaviour, organizational systems, network relationships and long-term value creation. In SMEs, leadership capital, organizational capital and network capital jointly shape sustainable productivity and stakeholder outcomes (Boeske & Murray, 2022). At a broader field level, sustainability leadership draws on multiple leadership traditions and organizational mechanisms rather than a single style (Eustachio et al., 2023).

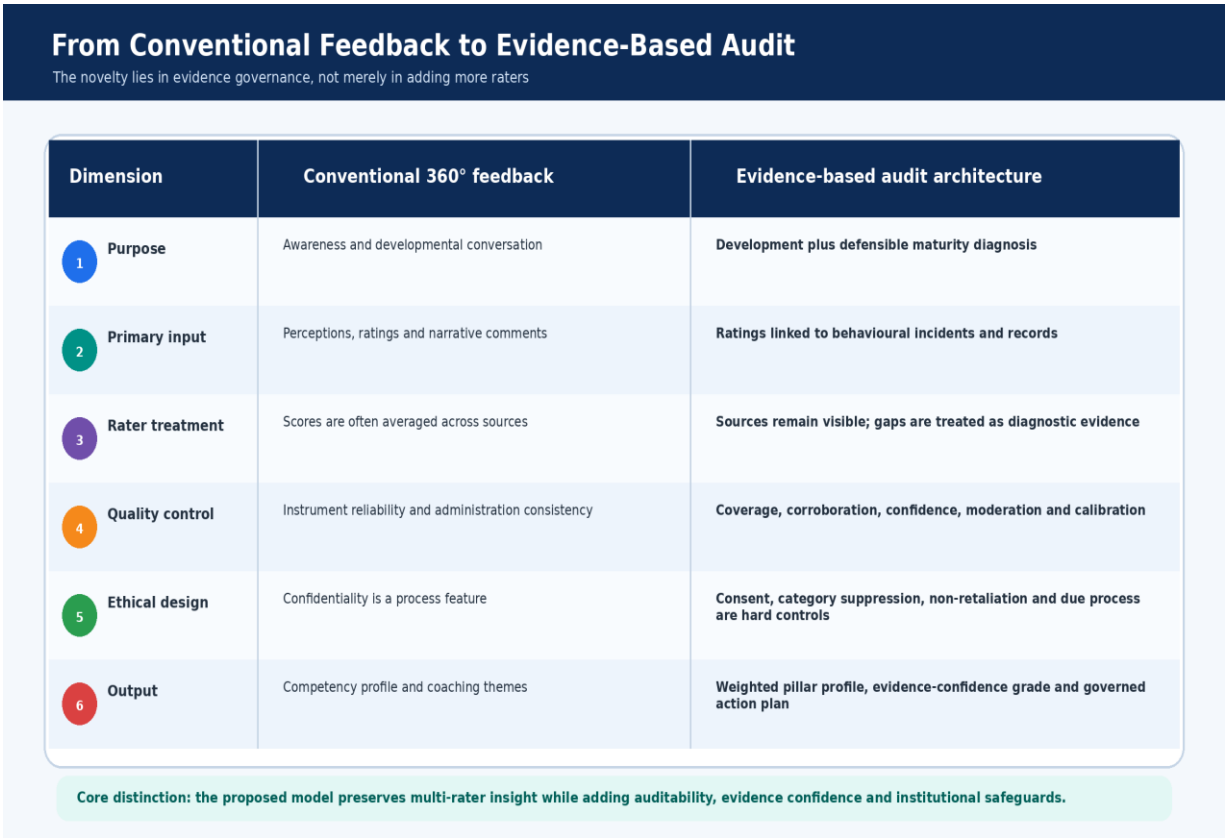
Resilience research similarly emphasizes the capacity to anticipate, cope, learn and adapt. Baird et al. (2023) found that sustainable leadership was associated with organizational resilience and that belief, interactive and diagnostic controls played mediating roles. Asian leadership research identifies self-, people- and organization-focused capabilities as integral to resilience under disruption (Albuquerque Pai et al., 2024), while project-based evidence shows that values, trust and situationally appropriate leadership can support resilience during crisis (Tvedt et al., 2023).

A 360-degree audit can support these outcomes through early detection and continuity planning. It can reveal whether a prospective successor is trusted across the system, whether a founder's decision speed is creating rework, whether a project leader preserves learning under pressure, and whether stakeholder confidence depends too heavily on one individual. These are governance questions with direct implications for continuity, talent retention, partnership quality and institutional memory.

2.6 Novelty: from feedback instrument to evidence-governed audit

The proposed contribution is not a new claim that multiple raters are useful. Its novelty lies in integrating multi-rater assessment with audit logic. Conventional feedback usually asks how a leader is perceived. The present architecture additionally asks what was observed, by whom, during which period, with what evidence quality, under what confidentiality conditions and for what authorized purpose. It thereby creates a defensible chain from perception to interpretation without treating human leadership as mechanical arithmetic.

Table 1. Differentiation between conventional 360° feedback and the proposed evidence-based audit architectureSource: Authors' synthesis



3. Theoretical Foundation: TLI as a Multi-Source Evidence Architecture

The Total Leadership Index is organized around four domains. Decision Stillness concerns the capacity to pause, test assumptions, surface alternatives and authorize action without impulsive pressure. Temporal Precision concerns timing, sequence, dependency awareness and commitment reliability. Structured Reflection concerns root-cause honesty, learning discipline and the closure of corrective action. Governed Speech concerns the accuracy, proportionality and institutional consequence of communication.

These domains are internally rooted but externally observable. Decision stillness becomes mature leadership when others experience prepared decisions rather than avoidable volatility. Temporal precision becomes visible through realistic sequencing, timely escalation and dependable commitments. Structured reflection becomes visible when leaders acknowledge error, investigate causes and change routines. Governed speech becomes visible when communication creates clarity, preserves dignity and avoids misinformation or pressure amplification.

The architecture therefore treats leadership as an ecology of impact. The leader is not assessed only as an individual possessing traits, but as a source of patterns transmitted through relationships and systems. The theoretical unit of analysis is the behaviour-consequence episode within a defined period. Ratings summarize repeated episodes; narrative evidence explains them; documentary evidence corroborates them where proportionate; and source gaps reveal relational asymmetry.

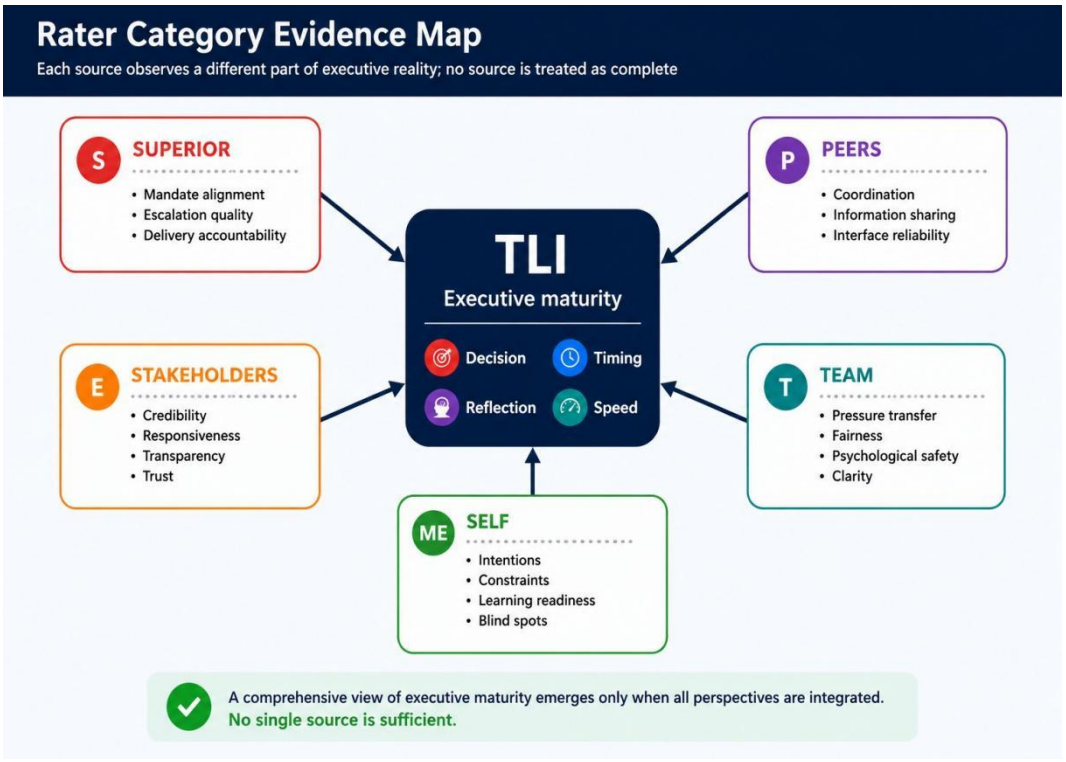


Figure 2. Rater category evidence map around the TLI maturity domains. Source: Authors' conceptualization.

4. Research Problem, Questions and Contributions

The research problem is the insufficiency of self-rating and superior-only appraisal for assessing executive maturity in a manner that is developmentally useful, ethically protected and sufficiently defensible for institutional use. Organizations need a method that captures multi-source impact without collapsing into popularity, retaliation, rivalry, unsupported allegation or opaque mathematical averaging.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: Why are self-rating and single-source appraisal insufficient for executive maturity assessment?
- RQ2: How should superior, peer, team, stakeholder and self-evidence be differentiated and weighted?
- RQ3: What evidence and confidence standards are required for a fair 360-degree leadership audit?
- RQ4: How can confidentiality, non-retaliation, calibration and due process reduce bias and misuse?
- RQ5: How can the audit support succession, resilient entrepreneurial organizations and long-term sustainability?

The paper makes five contributions. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundary between feedback and audit. Second, it specifies a five-source evidence architecture and role-sensitive weighting logic. Third, it develops a separate confidence assessment so that precision is not falsely implied by a single score. Fourth, it translates ethical principles into operational controls. Fifth, it extends multi-source leadership assessment to sustainability, succession and resilience by showing how source-gap patterns can inform continuity and institutional capability.

5. Methodology

5.1 Conceptual-methodological design

This is a conceptual-methodological framework-development paper. It does not use a survey dataset, experimental design or organizational audit sample, and it does not claim psychometric validation. The method is appropriate to the paper's purpose: to integrate established knowledge streams, define an auditable construct boundary and specify a protocol that can be tested empirically.

The framework was developed through five design tasks: (1) defining the limitations of self-rating and conventional 360-degree feedback; (2) mapping source-specific visibility across TLI domains; (3) specifying scoring, weighting and evidence-confidence principles; (4) translating bias, confidentiality and fairness risks into control requirements; and (5) aligning the architecture with organizational sustainability, succession and resilience use cases.

5.2 Literature integration and design criteria

The design integrates literature on leadership development, multi-source feedback, self-other agreement, performance measurement, psychometrics, sustainable leadership and resilience. The resulting architecture was evaluated against six internal design criteria: conceptual clarity; source differentiation; traceability; ethical proportionality; adaptability across roles; and empirical testability. These criteria do not establish external validity, but

they provide a disciplined basis for future validation.

5.3 Scope and boundary conditions

The model is intended for executive and leadership roles in corporations, SMEs, growth ventures, family firms, project organizations, public institutions, universities, healthcare systems and social enterprises. Sectoral adaptation is expected. Rater composition, minimum category size, evidence types and decision rights must reflect organizational scale, legal context and power structure. The architecture should not be used as covert surveillance, an anonymous grievance dump or a substitute for formal investigation where serious misconduct is alleged.

6. The 360-Degree Leadership Audit Construct

6.1 Definition

A 360-degree leadership audit is a structured, source-differentiated process that collects, triangulates, weights, moderates and ethically interprets leadership evidence from superior or board, peer, team, stakeholder and self sources. Within the TLI, it assesses how decision stillness, temporal precision, structured reflection and governed speech are experienced across the leader's relational system.

6.2 Core design principles

- Multi-source: no single rater category is presumed complete.
- Behaviour-anchored: ratings refer to observable conduct within a defined period.
- Source-visible: peer, team, stakeholder, superior and self patterns remain separately interpretable.
- Evidence-proportional: corroboration increases with the stakes of the intended use.
- Confidence-labelled: the strength of the evidence base is reported separately from the maturity score.
- Pre-declared: purpose, period, weighting and access rights are fixed before results are known.
- Ethically protected: confidentiality, non-retaliation and due process are operational controls.
- Development-oriented: scores lead to specific commitments, evidence review and reassessment.

6.3 Audit boundary

The audit is diagnostic rather than punitive by default. It may inform coaching, training, succession, role design, certification or governance review, but the authorized use must be declared. Serious red flags—such as retaliation, misinformation, abusive conduct, safety compromise or deliberate suppression of evidence—should trigger a separate process under applicable organizational rules. A maturity score must never be used to dilute or pre-judge such matters.

7. Rater Logic and Evidence Visibility

7.1 Superior or board assessment

Superior or board assessment preserves mandate accountability. It can evaluate decision preparation, strategic alignment, risk escalation, reporting reliability and the quality of institutional advice. Its limitations include preference for upward compliance, outcome bias and limited visibility of daily pressure transfer. Evidence should therefore include decision notes, review records, escalations and observable conduct under pressure rather than labels such as 'dynamic' or 'loyal'.

7.2 Peer assessment

Peers observe lateral leadership: coordination, handovers, interface maturity, challenge quality, information sharing and the reliability of cross-unit commitments. Peer evidence is particularly important in matrix, project and entrepreneurial settings where speed depends on cooperation across boundaries. Rivalry and territorial effects should be controlled through multiple raters, exposure screening and behaviour-specific examples.

7.3 Team and subordinate assessment

Team members experience instruction clarity, workload volatility, psychological safety, fairness, learning climate and the downward transmission of pressure. This category can reveal discrepancies that remain invisible upward. Because power asymmetry can distort candour, team evidence requires strong aggregation thresholds, comment masking, secure handling and enforceable non-retaliation provisions.

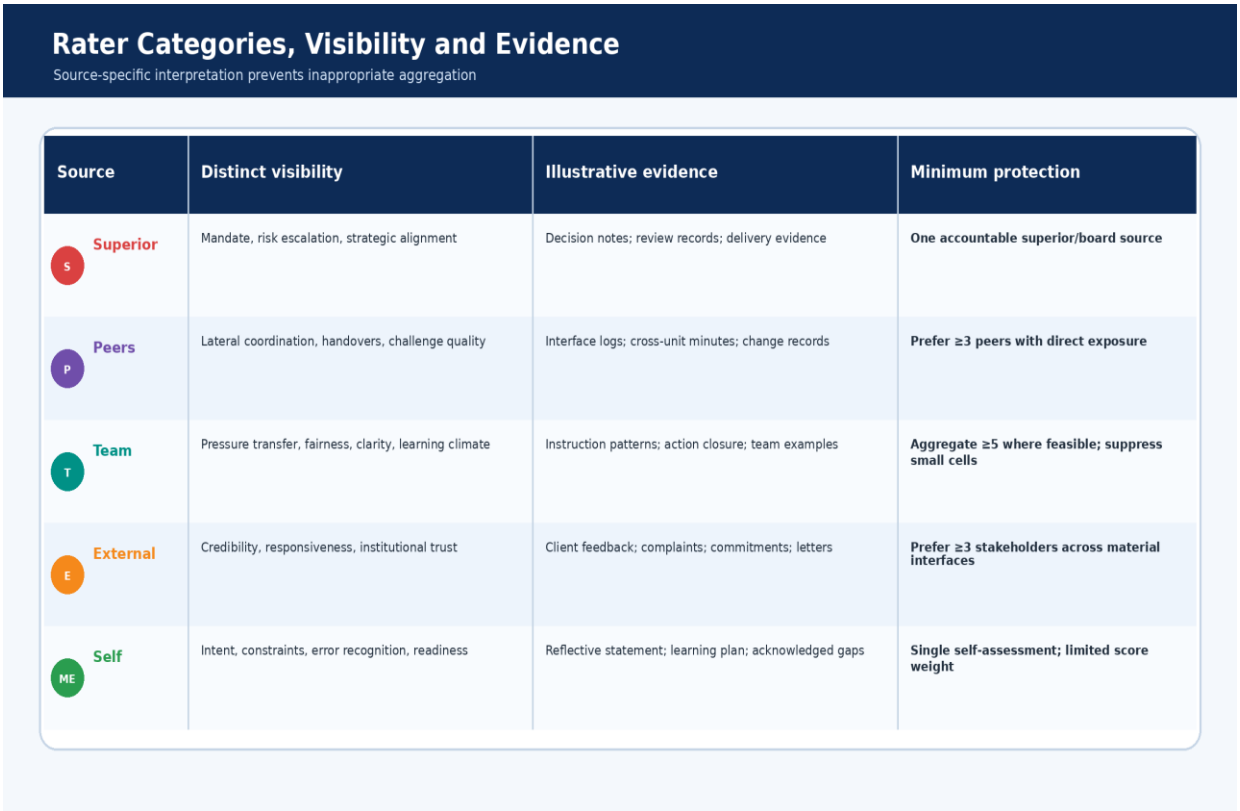
7.4 Stakeholder assessment

Stakeholders may include clients, customers, investors, contractors, suppliers, regulators, partners, beneficiaries, citizens or internal service users. They observe credibility, responsiveness, transparency and commitment integrity. Dissatisfaction should be interpreted contextually: principled enforcement of a rule is not equivalent to poor leadership. Repeated patterns of avoidable opacity, disrespect or unreliable commitments, however, are highly diagnostic.

7.5 Self-assessment

Self-assessment captures intention, constraints, internal reasoning and readiness to learn. It carries limited score weight but high coaching value. The most useful output is not the self-score alone; it is the self-other gap and the quality of reflection. A mature self-assessment identifies where the leader transferred pressure, mis-sequenced work, avoided root-cause truth or created clarity through governed speech.

Table 2. Rater categories, visibility, evidence and minimum protection requirements. Source: Authors' synthesis.



8. Weighting, Scoring and Evidence Confidence

8.1 Standard weighting

For general executive use, the proposed standard weighting is: superior or board 25 per cent, peers 20 per cent, team 25 per cent, stakeholders 20 per cent and self 10 per cent. The structure balances formal accountability, lateral coordination, people impact, external trust and reflective self-awareness. It deliberately prevents self-rating from dominating the result.

Weighted pillar score (p) = Σg wg × x̄pg
where wg is the pre-declared weight for source group g and x̄pg is the mean rating of pillar p by that source group.
Constraint: Σg wg = 1.00. The total TLI score is the aggregation of the four pillar scores under the approved TLI scale.

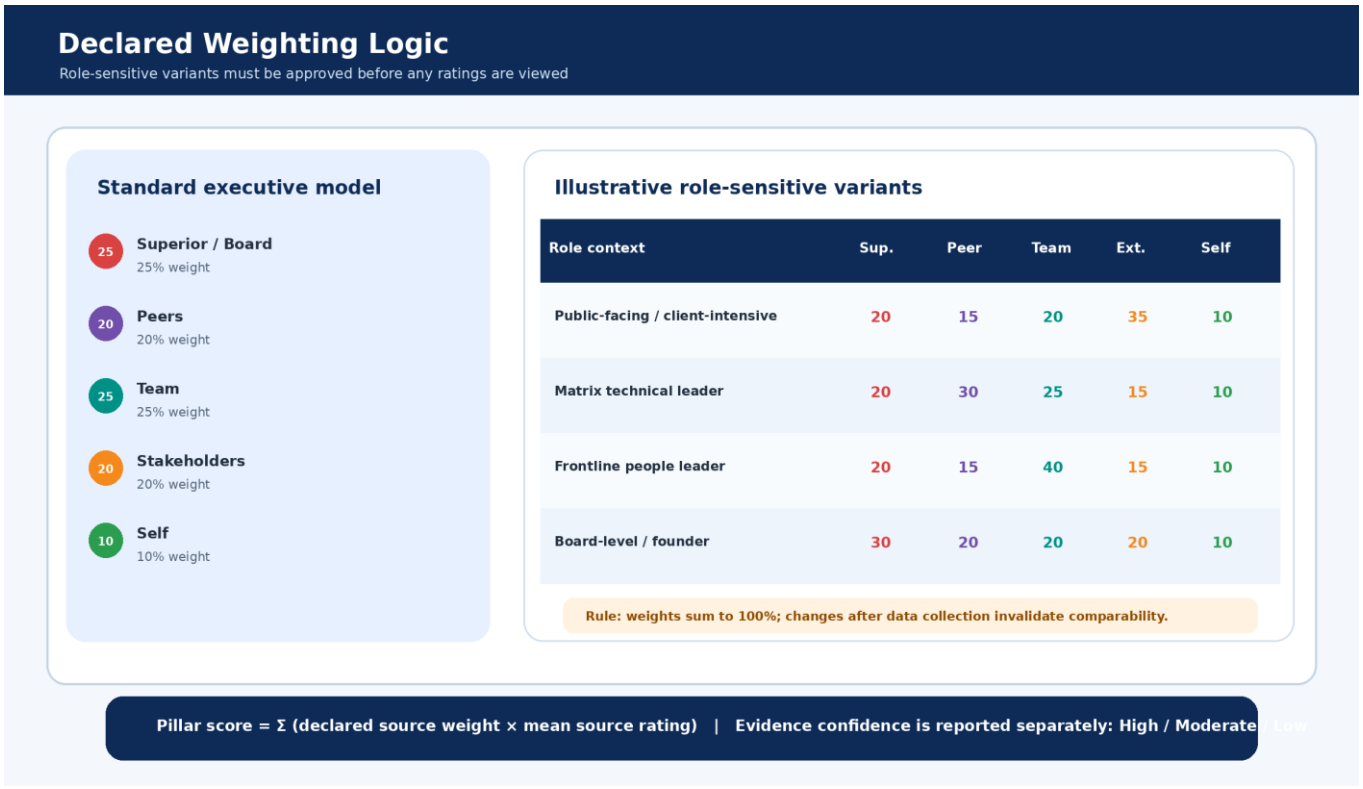
8.2 Role-sensitive variants

Weights may vary by role, but the rationale and formula must be approved before data collection. A public-facing executive may require greater stakeholder weight; a matrix technical leader may require greater peer weight; a frontline leader may require greater team weight; and a founder or board-level executive may replace the superior category with board, sponsor or investor assessment. Post hoc adjustment after scores are viewed is prohibited because it creates result-driven weighting.

8.3 Evidence-confidence grade

The score should not be artificially precise where evidence is weak. The architecture therefore reports an evidence-confidence grade separately from the numerical profile. Confidence is based on rater coverage, exposure quality, behavioural specificity, response completeness, documentary corroboration and stability of patterns across sources. High confidence indicates adequate coverage and repeated, behaviour-linked evidence; moderate confidence indicates usable but incomplete evidence; low confidence indicates that the score is provisional and should not support high-stakes decisions.

Table 3. Standard and illustrative role-sensitive weighting models. Source: Authors' conceptualization



9. Evidence Collection Protocol

9.1 Audit charter and assessment period

Every audit begins with a written charter defining purpose, sponsor, assessment period, role scope, rater groups, weighting, confidentiality, data access, moderation, reporting and authorized use. The period should be specific—for example, six months, a project phase, a crisis window, a financial year or a leadership-development cycle. Vague lifetime reputation invites recency and reputation carry-over bias.

9.2 Rater selection by exposure

Raters should be selected because they had meaningful exposure to the leader during the defined period. The audit administrator should prepare an exposure map and screen for conflicts, insufficient contact and overconcentration in one relationship. The assessed leader may propose names, but should not unilaterally control the final panel. In small organizations, categories may be combined for confidentiality, but source limitations must be disclosed.

9.3 Source-specific instruments

The same maturity domains should be maintained across sources, while item wording reflects source visibility. Team members can assess pressure transfer and review tone; stakeholders can assess commitment reliability and transparency; superiors can assess escalation and strategic alignment. Ratings should use behaviourally anchored scales and include opportunities to identify critical incidents, counterexamples and contextual constraints.

9.4 Documentary and narrative evidence

High-stakes interpretation should combine ratings with proportionate evidence such as decision notes, meeting minutes, escalation logs, change records, safety or quality actions, complaint and appreciation records, project dashboards, training evidence and communication samples. Documentary evidence should corroborate behaviour rather than become a surveillance archive. Narrative comments should be edited only to protect identity or remove personal attack, not to sanitize substantive criticism.

Figure 3. Evidence pipeline from audit charter to governed action. Source: Authors' conceptualization.

10. Confidentiality, Consent and Audit Ethics

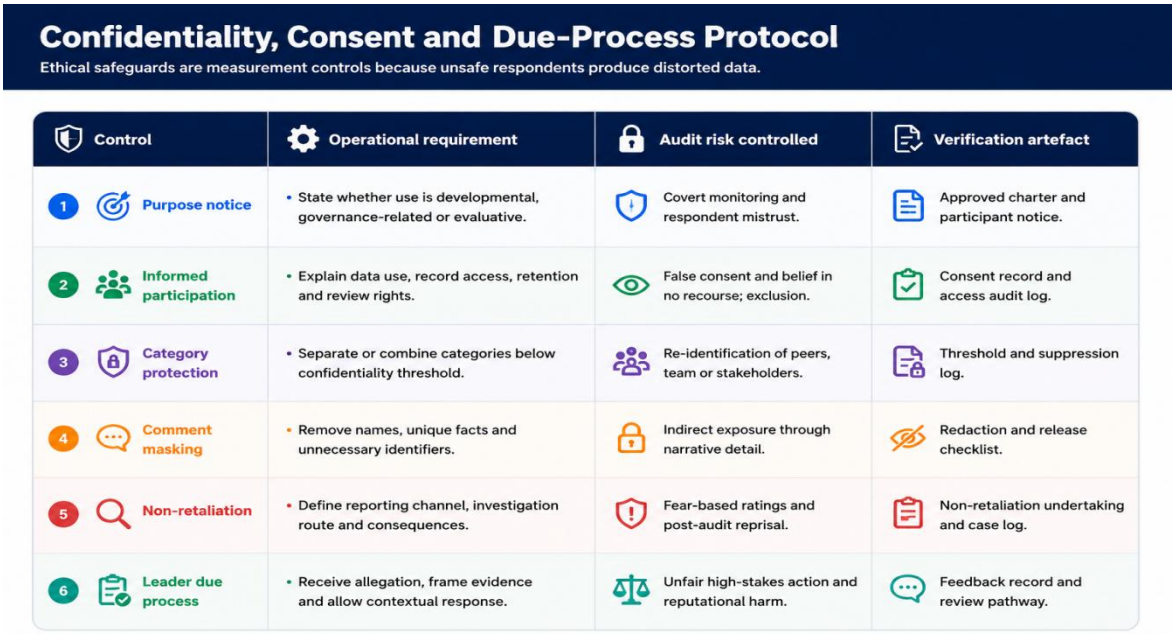
The ethical design of a 360-degree audit determines data quality. Respondents must understand whether the process is developmental, succession-related, evaluative or investigatory; who can access raw and aggregated data; how long information will be retained; and what protections and limitations apply. Ambiguity encourages defensive scoring and undermines trust.

Confidentiality must be operational rather than rhetorical. Sensitive categories should be aggregated, reports should suppress small cells, comments should be masked for unique identifiers, and raw data should be accessible only to authorized administrators. Absolute anonymity should not be promised where a small context makes identification possible. Honest disclosure of limits is more ethical than an impossible guarantee.

The assessed leader also requires due process. Reports should distinguish behaviour from identity, evidence from allegation and development need from misconduct. The leader should receive a structured feedback session, an opportunity to provide context and a documented pathway for review where the audit informs high-stakes decisions. This right does not permit the leader to identify or confront respondents.

Non-retaliation is a hard condition. Any adverse treatment linked to truthful participation should be examined through a protected channel. Retaliation is not merely a process breach; it is direct evidence of weakness in decision stillness, structured reflection and governed speech.

Table 4. Confidentiality, consent, non-retaliation and due-process protocol. Source: Authors' synthesis.



11. Moderation, Calibration and Red-Flag Logic

11.1 Completeness and exposure review

Moderation begins by checking whether required categories are represented, minimum thresholds are met, the assessment period is understood and raters had sufficient exposure. Missing categories are declared. A numerical total should not be presented as complete when material parts of the leadership system are absent.

11.2 Outliers and source gaps

Extreme ratings should not be automatically removed. An isolated score may reflect rivalry, but it may also reveal a behaviour visible only at one interface. The correct response is to test exposure, specificity, repetition and corroboration. Source gaps are central diagnostic evidence. A strong superior score combined with a weak team score may signal downward pressure transfer; a weak stakeholder score combined with strong internal ratings may signal credibility or transparency risk.

11.3 Calibration and bias controls

Calibration establishes a common interpretation of behavioural anchors and trains moderators to separate popularity from maturity. Common distortions include halo, horn, fear, revenge, recency, leniency, severity, similarity preference, reputation carry-over and outcome bias. The moderator should compare numerical patterns with evidence quality and avoid treating uniformity as reliability where confidentiality may have suppressed candour.

11.4 Red flags and conditional results

Serious evidence of misinformation, retaliation, abuse, safety compromise, data manipulation or deliberate suppression of root cause should not be diluted by a high average. The audit report may apply a conditional status, suspend certification, require a special review or refer the matter to an authorized process. The threshold and decision right must be established in the charter.

Figure 4. Bias and calibration control model. Source: Authors' conceptualization.

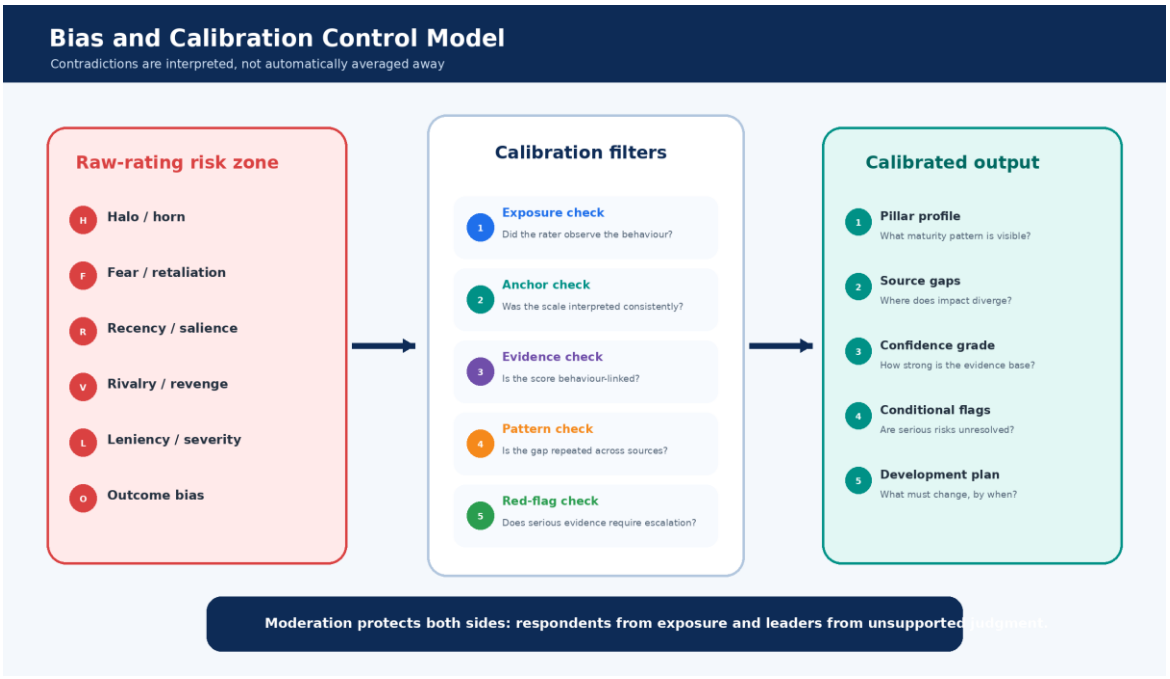


Table 5. Bias risk and mitigation matrix. Source: Authors' synthesis

Bias Risk and Mitigation Matrix

The control response depends on the likely distortion mechanism

Bias risk	Observable signal	Control response	Do not do
1 Halo / horn	Uniformly high or low scores with weak behavioural detail	**Require dimension-specific examples and cross-source comparison**	Accept global adjectives as evidence
2 Fear inflation	Team ratings cluster unusually high; comments are vague	**Strengthen anonymity, aggregate categories and test candour**	Treat silence as proof of mature leadership
3 Rivalry / revenge	One extreme peer or stakeholder pattern is isolated	**Retain as a signal; test exposure, repetition and corroboration**	Delete an outlier only because it is inconvenient
4 Recency bias	Ratings rely on one recent crisis or success	**Use a defined period and request multiple incidents**	Assess lifetime reputation from a single episode
5 Outcome bias	Good results excuse harmful process, or failure erases sound conduct	**Score behaviour and consequence separately**	Equate delivery success with leadership maturity
6 Self-protection	Self-rating conflicts with repeated external evidence	**Use self-other gap for reflection and coaching**	Let self-rating dominate the total score

12. Organizational Implementation and Practical Examples

12.1 Growth-stage entrepreneurial venture

A founder-led technology venture may use the audit when rapid growth creates recurring priority changes, employee burnout and client commitment risk. The board or investor group assesses strategic discipline; senior peers assess cross-functional coordination; employees assess delegation and pressure transfer; key clients assess transparency and reliability. The output may show that the founder's vision is strong but temporal precision and governed speech are weak. The development response can include decision gates, a commitment log, delegation protocols and a 120-day reassessment rather than premature removal from the leadership role.

12.2 Family-owned SME and succession

A family-owned SME can use the architecture to assess a successor without equating ownership status with leadership readiness. Family board members, non-family executives, employees, suppliers and long-term customers provide different evidence. The critical question is whether the successor is trusted to preserve continuity while professionalizing systems. A conditional succession decision may require improvement in fairness, conflict handling, decision documentation and stakeholder communication before full authority transfers.

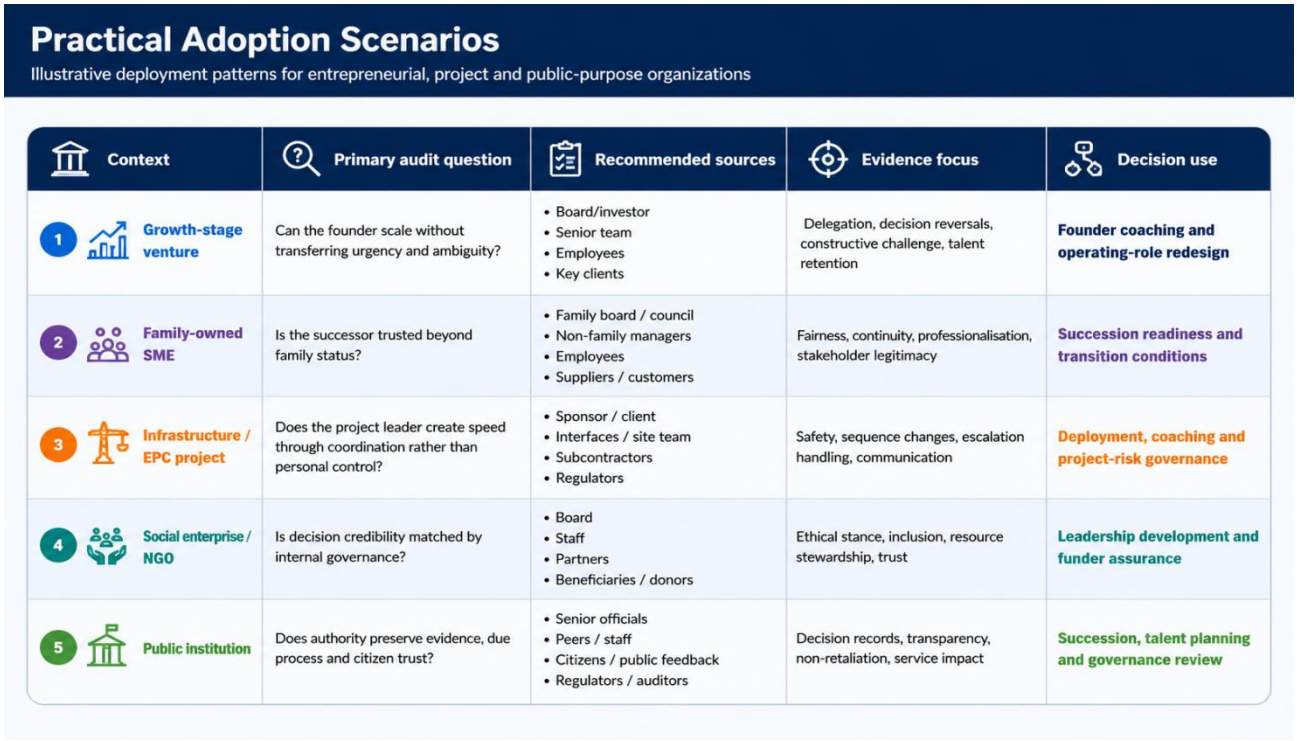
12.3 Project and infrastructure organization

For a project director, superior ratings may be high because reporting and milestone presentation are strong, while peers report uncoordinated sequence changes and the site team reports late urgency, public correction and unclear instruction. Clients may value presentation quality but note delayed disclosure of emerging risks. The audit reveals a split profile: upward confidence is strong, but internal pressure containment and interface reliability are weak. Coaching can focus on escalation timing, dependency reviews and governed internal speech, with project records providing reassessment evidence.

12.4 Social enterprise or public-purpose institution

A social enterprise or public institution may assess whether mission credibility is matched by internal governance. Board members, staff, partner organizations, beneficiaries or citizens can provide evidence on ethical communication, inclusion, resource stewardship and service reliability. The audit should be especially careful not to treat stakeholder dissatisfaction as proof of poor leadership where lawful or ethical constraints required an unpopular decision. Repeated evidence of opacity, disrespect or retaliation, however, must carry governance consequence.

Table 6. Practical adoption scenarios across entrepreneurial, family, project and public-purpose organizations. Source: Authors' synthesis



13. Sustainability, Succession and Resilience Implications

13.1 Long-term organizational sustainability

Leadership sustainability depends on whether value-creating behaviour becomes institutional rather than remaining dependent on personal charisma. By connecting leadership impact to routines, evidence and reassessment, the audit can help organizations identify practices that preserve trust, learning and stakeholder relationships. The contribution is indirect and conditional: the audit does not produce sustainability by itself, but it can expose leadership patterns that undermine long-term capability.

13.2 Succession readiness

Succession decisions often overemphasize technical results, tenure, sponsorship or self-presentation. The proposed architecture broadens readiness to include lateral trust, team experience, stakeholder legitimacy and reflective capacity. A successor may therefore be classified as ready, ready with conditions, development required or not currently suitable. Such classifications should be evidence-based, time-bound and reviewable rather than permanent labels.

13.3 Resilient entrepreneurial organizations

Entrepreneurial resilience requires speed without

chaos, adaptation without memory loss and founder influence without dependence. Multi-source evidence can reveal whether urgency is being translated into coordinated action or fragmented pressure. Repeated audits can show whether development commitments reduce reversals, improve information flow, strengthen psychological safety and preserve customer trust during growth or disruption.

13.4 Institutional learning

At aggregate level, anonymized audit patterns can inform leadership curricula, governance controls and succession pipelines. If multiple leaders show low temporal precision, the organization may have a system-level dependency problem rather than an individual deficit. If stakeholder scores are consistently weak, communication or service-governance reforms may be required. Individual audit evidence should therefore be protected, while aggregate learning is used to improve institutional design.

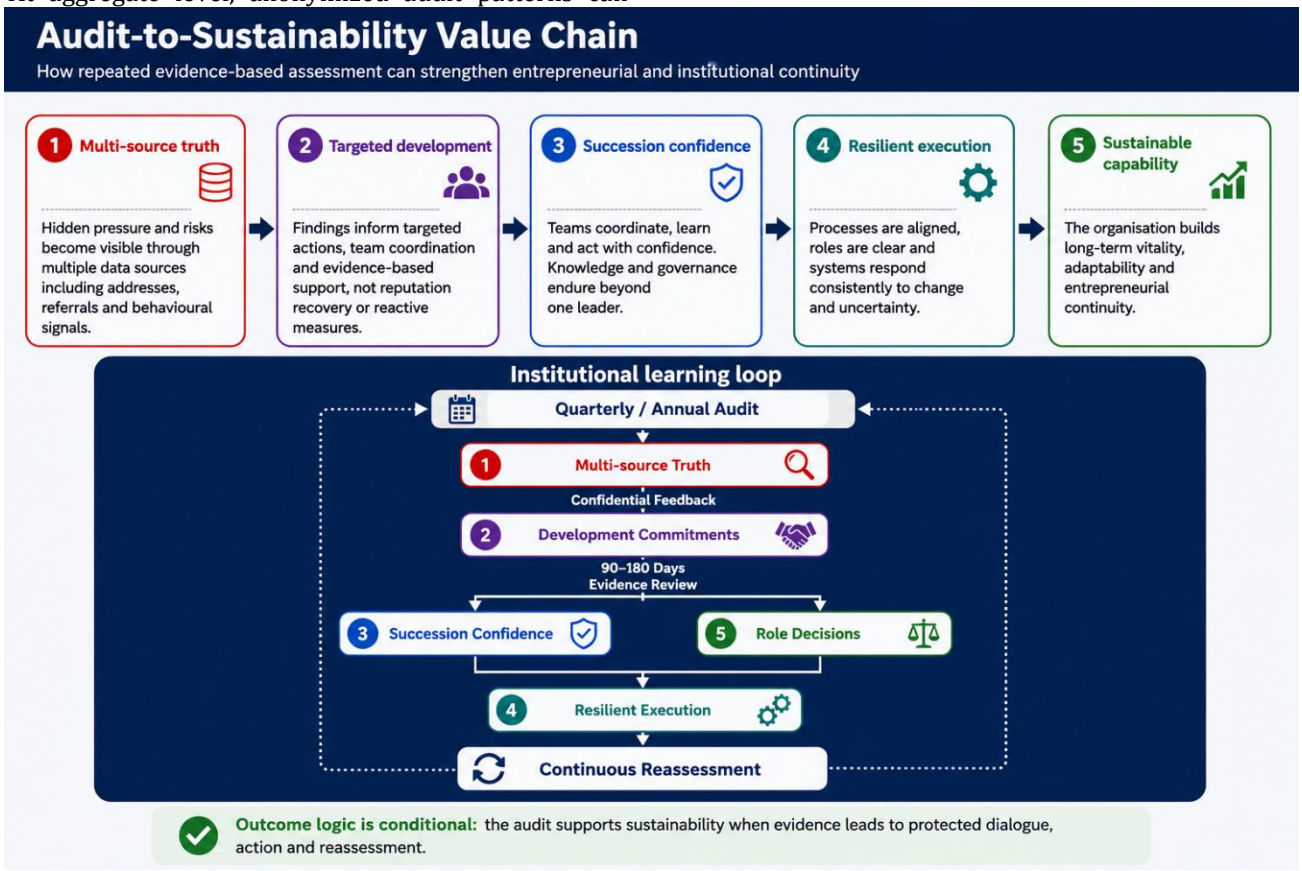


Figure 5. Audit-to-sustainability value chain and institutional learning loop. Source: Authors' conceptualization

14. Research Propositions and Future Empirical Agenda

The following propositions are offered for empirical examination:

P1: Source-differentiated TLI assessment will identify executive maturity risks that are not visible in self-rating or superior-only appraisal.

P2: Superior-team gaps will be positively associated with indicators of pressure transfer, psychological safety risk and avoidable turnover.

P3: Behavioural anchoring and rater calibration will improve inter-rater reliability within source categories without eliminating meaningful source differences.

P4: Strong confidentiality and non-retaliation safeguards will increase narrative specificity and reduce fear-inflated ratings.

P5: Evidence confidence will predict participant acceptance and the defensibility of high-stakes audit use beyond the numerical score alone.

P6: Evidence-moderated 360-degree audits followed by coaching and reassessment will produce greater behavioural improvement than unmoderated feedback reports.

P7: Source-balanced succession assessment will improve perceived fairness and post-transition stakeholder trust in SMEs and family enterprises.

P8: Improvement in temporal precision, structured reflection and governed speech will be associated with greater organizational resilience and continuity outcomes.

Validation should proceed in stages. First, expert review and cognitive interviewing should refine domain definitions and source-specific items. Second, pilot studies should test internal consistency, factor structure, measurement invariance and rater

sufficiency. Third, generalizability and multilevel models should separate leader, rater, source and context effects. Fourth, longitudinal studies should test whether coached leaders improve on repeated evidence, not merely on self-report. Fifth, predictive studies should examine links with turnover, psychological safety, project reliability, stakeholder trust, succession outcomes and resilience indicators.

15. Discussion

15.1 From perception to governed evidence

The conceptual shift is not from subjective to objective assessment, because leadership judgment will always involve interpretation. The shift is from unmanaged perception to governed evidence. The architecture asks who observed what, how frequently, under which conditions and with what consequence. This creates traceability while preserving the relational character of leadership.

15.2 From popularity to maturity

A popular leader may avoid difficult accountability, while a principled leader may be unpopular for legitimate reasons. The audit must therefore distinguish comfort from maturity. Decision stillness does not mean indecision; governed speech does not mean agreeable speech; structured reflection does not mean self-blame; and temporal precision does not mean speed at any cost. Behavioural anchors and contextual evidence protect these distinctions.

15.3 From individual score to systemic diagnosis

The most valuable output may be the pattern rather than the total. A leader may perform well externally and poorly internally, or vice versa. Several leaders may display the same weakness because the organization rewards urgency, suppresses dissent or lacks clear decision rights. The audit can therefore support both individual development and institutional diagnosis, provided aggregate learning does not compromise respondent confidentiality.

15.4 Relevance to the Journal of Asia Entrepreneurship and Sustainability

The architecture is particularly relevant to Asian entrepreneurial and institutional contexts characterized by family ownership, founder centrality, rapid scaling, project intensity, relational networks and varying power distance. A source-differentiated, ethically protected audit can help organizations preserve respect for hierarchy while creating legitimate channels for upward, lateral and external evidence. Its sustainability contribution lies in strengthening succession, stakeholder trust, learning and resilience rather than treating leadership assessment as a periodic HR formality.

16. Limitations

The model is conceptual and has not been empirically validated. The proposed weights, thresholds, confidence criteria and role variants are design hypotheses rather than established norms. Organizations should pilot the architecture before using it for consequential decisions.

The TLI domains require psychometric development, including item generation, content validation, measurement invariance, inter-rater reliability and predictive validity. Cultural and sectoral differences may alter the observability and meaning of behaviours. Translation into local languages may also affect scale interpretation.

Documentary corroboration can improve defensibility but may create administrative burden or surveillance concerns if applied excessively. The principle of proportionality must therefore govern evidence collection. Small organizations face additional confidentiality constraints and may need pooled categories or external administration.

Finally, an audit can be misused by powerful sponsors, defensive leaders or politicized raters. No instrument can substitute for ethical governance. Independent administration, transparent rules, appeal mechanisms and sanctions for retaliation remain necessary.

17. Conclusion

Leadership cannot be assessed fairly through a single mirror. Self-rating reveals intention but not complete impact. Superior appraisal reveals accountability but may miss hidden pressure. Peer evidence reveals interfaces; team evidence reveals daily conduct; stakeholder evidence reveals external trust. A credible executive maturity architecture must preserve all of these lenses while governing their limitations.

This paper has developed a 360-degree audit architecture for evidence-based executive maturity assessment using the Total Leadership Index. It specifies rater categories, source visibility, weighting, evidence confidence, collection protocols, confidentiality, non-retaliation, moderation, red-flag logic and implementation pathways. Its distinctive contribution is to move beyond the feedback survey toward an auditable, ethically protected and development-oriented account of leadership impact.

For entrepreneurial and sustainability-oriented organizations, the architecture offers a practical way to connect leadership assessment with succession, resilience, stakeholder legitimacy and institutional learning. The mature organization does not ask only whether a leader appears successful upward. It asks whether decisions are calm, timing is disciplined, reflection is honest and speech preserves trust across the system. The proposed audit makes those questions visible and testable.

Declarations

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Data availability: No empirical dataset was

generated or analyzed.

Ethics statement: Ethical approval was not required because the paper is conceptual and contains no human-participant data.

Author contributions: Dr. Alok Kumar Bhargava developed the conceptual architecture and primary manuscript; Dr. Sonali Sneha contributed organizational application, sustainability positioning and critical review. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

Research highlights

- Reframes 360-degree feedback as an evidence-governed audit rather than a popularity or perception survey.
- Differentiates rater sources, behavioural evidence, confidence grades, moderation and declared weighting.
- Connects executive maturity assessment with succession readiness, entrepreneurial resilience and organizational sustainability.
- Provides implementation protocols for confidentiality, non-retaliation, due process and reassessment.
- Offers publication-ready visual architectures and practical adoption scenarios for SMEs, ventures, projects and public institutions.

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