

## CONCEPTUALIZING AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

*Pregledni znanstveni članak*

*Emir Muhić*

*University of Banja Luka, Faculty of Philology, English Department  
e-mail: emir.muhic@ff.unibl.org*

*Nenad Blaženović*

*University College “CEPS – Center for Business Studies” Kiseljak  
e-mail: nenad.blazenovic@ceps.edu.ba*

*Sanel Hadžiahmetović Jurida*

*University of Tuzla, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of  
English Language and Literature,  
e-mail: sanel.h.jurida@untz.ba*

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines autocratic leadership through a series of conceptual metaphors: Leader as Sovereign, Architect, Captain, Gatekeeper, Conductor, and Guardian. Each metaphor offers insights into the central role of autocratic leadership in decision-making and organizational control, emphasizing their dominance and unilateral control. The analysis reveals how these metaphors highlight both the strengths such as decisive crisis management and strategic organization and the limitations such as stifled creativity and subordinate autonomy of autocratic leadership. By contrasting these metaphorical perspectives, the paper illuminates the complexity of autocratic leadership and underscores the need for the balance between authoritative control and flexibility to foster a productive organizational environment. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how autocratic leadership styles impact organizational dynamics and effectiveness.*

*Key words: Autocratic Leadership, Conceptual Metaphors, Leadership Metaphors, Organizational Culture.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autocratic leadership, characterized by a strong central authority and unilateral decision-making, has been a pivotal management style throughout human history. The roots of this leadership style extend back to the earliest chapters of civilization, where group leaders, often the oldest or strongest, have wielded significant influence over the group's survival and cohesion (Yildirim, Caki, & Harmanci, 2020). Despite its ancient origins, the relevance and implications of autocratic leadership continue to provoke significant scholarly interest and debate.

Recent studies have highlighted both the advantages and the challenges associated with autocratic leadership. For instance, Schuh et al. (2012) identified the impact of moral and authoritarian leadership on follower reactions, particularly in the absence of transformational qualities. Meanwhile, other researchers like Kiazad et al. (2010) and De Hoogh et al. (2015) have explored the negative correlations between autocratic leadership, abusive supervision, and team psychological safety. Such insights suggest that the effects of autocratic leadership are complex and varied, influencing factors ranging from team performance to individual well-being (Chu, 2014; Wang et al., 2013).

In addition to these impacts, autocratic leadership plays a critical role in organizational dynamics, especially during crises or in environments requiring decisive action (Hinnebusch, 2006; Harms et al., 2018). The leadership style is noted for its ability to foster quick decision-making and maintain organizational momentum, qualities that are sometimes essential for navigating challenging periods. Yet, the use of fear and coercion, common within autocratic regimes, presents substantial risks, potentially undermining trust and legitimacy (Yildirim, Caki, & Harmanci, 2020; Chen et al., 2011).

This paper seeks to explore autocratic leadership through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, aiming to understand how various metaphors shape and reflect our understanding of this leadership style. By examining how metaphors conceptualize autocratic leadership, this study intends to offer deeper insights into its dynamics, its perception among followers, and its implications for organizational behavior. The findings aim to contribute to

a more nuanced understanding of autocratic leadership and its role in contemporary management practices.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). This theory argues that our comprehension of abstract concepts is extensively mediated through metaphorical mappings from concrete, experiential domains. These “domains are construed as cognitive entities, representational spaces, conceptual complexes of varying levels of intricacy and organisation.” (Muhić, 2024) Metaphors are, therefore, seen not just as linguistic embellishments but as fundamental to human thought, shaping how we perceive and interact with abstract ideas. For instance, we often understand time in terms of commerce, using phrases like “saving time” or “spending time,” which illustrate how concrete experiences help us conceptualize abstract concepts.

In this study, the approach involves a detailed literature review focused on identifying and analyzing metaphors pertinent to Autocratic leadership. As Muhić (2023) points out, human beings, including, critically, for this study, autocratic leaders, can be conceptualized as “a nuanced multitude of veneers,” meaning that all of the metaphors analyzed pertain to an autocratic leader. The metaphors considered most relevant include concepts such as the leader as a sovereign, which implies absolute rule; the leader as an architect, emphasizing systematic planning; the leader as a captain, denoting guidance and control; the leader as a gatekeeper, controlling access to resources; the leader as a conductor, ensuring harmony and coordination; and the leader as a guardian, focusing on protection and oversight.

These metaphors were thoroughly analyzed to assess their implications, benefits, and drawbacks in the context of Autocratic leadership. The analysis considered how each metaphor influences our understanding of leadership behaviors, the roles leaders play, and the psychological and social effects these metaphorical frameworks might engender. The study concludes with a comparative analysis, examining the distinct contributions and limitations of each metaphor to provide a nuanced understanding of how they variously shape perceptions of Autocratic leadership. This comparison

aims to highlight the unique insights and potential misconceptions that each metaphor brings to the conceptualization of autocratic control and influence.

### 3. RESULTS

In studying autocratic leadership through the lens of cognitive linguistics, the selection of accurate metaphors is crucial to capturing the leadership style's essence and dynamics. These metaphors – “Leader is Sovereign”, “Leader is Captain,” “Leader is Architect,” “Leader is Gatekeeper,” “Leader is Conductor,” and “Leader is Guardian” - are chosen for their ability to reflect the central aspects of autocratic leadership, such as centralized decision-making, unilateral authority, and the critical role of trust in leader-subordinate dynamics. These metaphors are not just decorative but serve as significant conceptual tools that enhance understanding of the autocratic leadership style, providing deep insights into its mechanisms and implications within organizational settings.

#### 3.1. Leader is Sovereign

The “Leader is Sovereign” metaphor within autocratic leadership vividly illustrates the dynamics of this leadership style by likening the organization to a kingdom where the leader's decisions are absolute and indisputable, akin to royal decrees. This metaphor underscores a hierarchical and centralized decision-making process where employees, portrayed as subjects, are expected to execute these decisions without question. For instance, launching a new product or entering a new market is metaphorically described as expanding the kingdom's territories, emphasizing the unilateral nature of decisions and expectation of compliance from the subjects.

Practically, this metaphor shapes organizational operations and culture significantly. For example, operational policies are framed as royal edicts, setting strict guidelines that employees must follow rigidly, akin to how subjects must adhere to a sovereign's laws. Similarly, initiatives to shape company culture are seen as the sovereign's vision for the kingdom, dictating the norms and values from the top down.

However, this metaphor also brings limitations. While it clarifies the hierarchy and can foster a sense of unity and loyalty akin to a kingdom

rallying behind a sovereign, it risks stifling creativity and innovation by discouraging dissent and critical thinking among employees. They might feel their roles are to merely follow orders, leading to disengagement and a lack of initiative. Moreover, equating leadership actions to decrees can glorify absolute power, potentially leading to abuses of authority and a resistance to adaptability within the organization. This metaphor may oversimplify the complex dynamics of leadership that also involve nurturing talent and fostering innovation, which are crucial for a thriving organizational environment.

### **3.2. Leader is Captain**

The “Leader is Captain” metaphor depicts the leader as the captain of a ship, steering the organizational vessel through the competitive and sometimes stormy waters of the business environment. Employees are seen as the crew, expected to execute the captain’s orders without question to navigate the organization towards its goals efficiently and effectively.

Practical examples of this metaphor include a leader making strategic decisions about the organization’s direction and policies, which are likened to a captain charting a course or adjusting the sails. Implementing a new company policy can be described as “charting a new course,” while overcoming significant challenges might be referred to as “weathering a storm.” The goals of the organization are envisioned as the “distant shore” or “port of call” the ship aims to reach, emphasizing a focused and purposeful effort.

This metaphor encapsulates the dynamics of autocratic leadership by illustrating the authority and directive nature of the leader and the structured, collective endeavor required to achieve organizational objectives. It portrays the leader as a pivotal figure capable of navigating through business challenges with decisiveness, akin to a captain’s crucial actions during a crisis ensuring the safety and progress of the ship and its crew.

However, this metaphor also illustrates potential downsides. The depiction of employees as crew members who must precisely follow orders can imply a lack of autonomy and may stifle creativity and engagement, as they are expected to adhere rigidly to the leader’s plans without deviation. Moreover, portraying the leader as the sole navigator suggests a heavy dependence on the leader’s presence and decision-making, risking

organizational instability in their absence and potentially undervaluing the contributions of other team members.

In scenarios where employees feel overworked or undervalued, the metaphor could hint at dissent, likened to a “mutiny,” pointing to the risks of resistance or dissatisfaction within the ranks if the leadership becomes too controlling or neglects the crew’s welfare.

Overall, the “Leader is Captain” metaphor offers a dual perspective on autocratic leadership, highlighting its effectiveness in directive, crisis management, and goal achievement while also pointing to challenges related to employee autonomy and over-centralization of authority.

### **3.3. Leader is Architect**

The “Leader is Architect” metaphor within autocratic leadership frames the leader as akin to an architect who meticulously designs and constructs the organizational structure. This metaphor highlights the leader’s vision and strategic planning capabilities, likening them to drafting a blueprint for the company’s future, which outlines a detailed and deliberate path that the organization is expected to follow. Practical examples of this include the leader setting foundational policies and core values described as “laying the foundation” of the organization, emphasizing the importance of a strong base for supporting all other operations.

Significant organizational changes under this leadership style are metaphorically framed as “renovating the building,” illustrating the leader’s role in making strategic adjustments to enhance functionality or adapt to new circumstances. Similarly, the assignment of roles and responsibilities within the company is compared to an architect deciding “who occupies which room,” suggesting a strategic placement of individuals in roles that optimize organizational efficiency and goal achievement.

Challenges faced by the organization are viewed as tests of the structure’s integrity, with successful navigation through these challenges described as “ensuring the building withstands the storm.” This underscores the leader’s foresight and the robustness of their planning, aiming to ensure organizational resilience and stability.

However, while this metaphor accentuates the structured and systematic approach of autocratic leadership, it also implies potential downsides such as rigidity and inflexibility. The depiction of the leader as

the sole architect drafting the blueprint suggests a top-down decision-making process that may limit creativity and inhibit innovation by not allowing deviations once plans are set in motion. Moreover, focusing predominantly on structural aspects may overlook the human element, such as the emotional impact of organizational changes on employees, treating them more as components of a structure rather than as individuals.

In essence, the “Leader is Architect” metaphor effectively conveys the strategic and structured nature of autocratic leadership through practical examples, but it also highlights potential challenges related to rigidity, an overlooked human element, and over-centralized decision-making.

### **3.4. Leader is Gatekeeper**

The “Leader is Gatekeeper” metaphor within autocratic leadership captures the control exerted over information flow and decision-making within an organization, portraying the leader as the guardian of a castle’s gate. This leader, like a vigilant gatekeeper, carefully selects which ideas, information, and individuals are allowed to enter the organizational realm, ensuring that only those aligning with the set vision pass through. For instance, the leader might treat decisions as specially crafted keys, designed to open only certain doors, symbolizing selective acceptance of initiatives and suggestions that fit their strict criteria.

This approach is evident in how strategic meetings transform into sessions where the leader evaluates the merit of each idea, akin to a gatekeeper scrutinizing visitors. Such a controlled environment ensures the organizational strategy remains a guarded treasure, accessible only to chosen initiatives and individuals deemed beneficial by the leader. This tight grip on decision-making and information parallels a gatekeeper ensuring that only authorized persons enter certain parts of the castle, thus maintaining a clear, unambiguous direction for the organization, similar to a well-guarded path leading to a fortified destination.

However, this metaphor also highlights the potential drawbacks of such stringent control. The selective admission by the gatekeeper can lead to a lack of diversity in thought and a stifling of innovation, as fresh, potentially groundbreaking ideas might be blocked like unwelcome visitors at a gate. Employees may feel their contributions are undervalued if their ideas consistently fail to gain entry, leading to disenfranchisement and a decrease

in morale, similar to visitors feeling unwelcome or overly scrutinized by a strict gatekeeper. Moreover, this approach can create information silos within the organization, as knowledge becomes compartmentalized and restricted, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for synergy, akin to isolated chambers within a fortified castle.

The “Leader is Gatekeeper” metaphor, thus, beautifully illustrates the balance between control and constraint in autocratic leadership, emphasizing the leader’s role in safeguarding the strategic direction and core values while also acknowledging the risks associated with excessive control over information and decision-making processes.

### **3.5. Leader is Conductor**

Within the context of autocratic leadership, the metaphor “Leader is Conductor” depicts the leader’s role as similar to a conductor of an orchestra, where precise direction and control are essential. In this scenario, the organization is likened to an orchestra where each employee, akin to a musician with a specific instrument, plays a unique role. The autocratic leader, wielding the metaphorical baton, orchestrates these individual efforts to create a unified performance that adheres strictly to the strategic plan envisioned for the organization.

Practical examples of this include a leader conducting a planning session, akin to a rehearsal, where strategies are detailed and employee roles are defined, ensuring that everyone knows their exact functions and timing. This process ensures that all parts of the organization work in harmony towards common goals, much like musicians in an orchestra produce a cohesive musical piece under the guidance of the conductor. Feedback sessions in this metaphor are comparable to a conductor’s critique during rehearsals, designed to fine-tune performances to reach an optimal outcome.

The autocratic leader, like the conductor, signals the start and end of organizational initiatives, directs the pace of work, and integrates the diverse functions of the organization to ensure a seamless execution of projects. This approach can enhance efficiency and productivity by minimizing delays and ensuring disciplined execution. However, such a leadership style can also limit personal initiative and creativity among employees, as they are



expected to follow the leader's vision and direction without deviation, similar to musicians playing a score without personal interpretation.

Moreover, just as an orchestra's reliance on a conductor for cues and tempo can hinder musicians' independence, an organization overly dependent on an autocratic leader may struggle with fostering independent decision-making among its team members. Should the leader misinterpret the strategic 'score' or communicate poorly, it could lead to a disjointed organizational performance, echoing the chaos of an orchestra without effective leadership.

Therefore, the "Leader is Conductor" metaphor not only highlights the structured and controlled approach of autocratic leadership but also reflects its potential drawbacks, such as stifling innovation and over-dependence on the leader, which can ultimately impact the organization's ability to adapt and thrive independently.

### **3.6. Leader is Guardian**

The "Leader is Guardian" metaphor within autocratic leadership portrays the leader as a vigilant guardian who meticulously oversees the safety, direction, and well-being of the organization, much like a guardian protecting a realm. This metaphor casts the organization as a territory under the watchful eye of the leader, whose directives and decisions are designed to guide the organization towards prosperity while protecting it from external and internal threats. For example, the leader may implement stringent protocols and guidelines described as the metaphorical "walls" that shield the team from market fluctuations and competitive pressures, ensuring stability and security within the organization.

In this framework, strategies and policies devised by the leader are akin to fortifications that guard against potential disruptions. These protective measures foster a stable and secure working environment, much like a guardian's castle offers refuge to its inhabitants. The leader's role in this metaphor is to provide clear guidance and set firm paths, which can help reduce ambiguity in roles and expectations, enhancing operational efficiency. The clarity and structure provided by the leader help ensure that all team members are aligned and understand their roles, similar to how a guardian marks safe routes through hazardous terrain.

Moreover, the protective stance of the leader can engender loyalty and unity among employees, who may feel valued and cared for, thus strengthening their commitment to the organization. This sense of security and order can be reassuring, much like the peace and safety ensured by a vigilant guardian within their domain.

However, this metaphor also has its drawbacks. The dependency fostered by the leader's protective measures might limit employees' ability to act independently. They might become too reliant on the leader for direction and validation, potentially stifling individual initiative and creativity. This can be likened to townsfolk who wait for a guardian's signal before undertaking any action, which can diminish their ability to learn from experiences and grow professionally.

Additionally, the metaphor might inadvertently create a paternalistic atmosphere where the leader's protective stance is perceived as overbearing or condescending. Employees might feel overly sheltered, which can lead to frustration among those seeking more independence and opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities. This can hinder personal and professional development, as employees under a closely guarded leadership style may miss out on the challenges and risks that are crucial for fostering growth and innovation.

#### **4. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of autocratic leadership through various conceptual metaphors such as the Leader as Sovereign, Architect, Captain, Gatekeeper, Conductor, and Guardian offers a comprehensive view of this leadership style, each providing unique insights into its characteristics, strengths, and drawbacks. These metaphors share a common emphasis on the autocratic leader's pivotal role in decision-making and protection but differ in how they portray the leader's interactions with subordinates and the environment. For instance, the "Leader as Sovereign" metaphor highlights absolute authority and the expectation of obedience, much like a monarch rules their kingdom, demanding loyalty and submission from subjects. In contrast, the "Leader as Architect" metaphor showcases the leader's role in carefully planning and structuring the organization, akin to an architect designing a building, ensuring every element aligns perfectly with the overall vision.

Practical examples in an organizational setting might see the “Leader as Captain” metaphor in action during crises, where the leader navigates the company through economic downturns or market instability, decisively steering the organization much like a captain guides a ship through stormy seas. Similarly, the “Leader as Gatekeeper” metaphor is evident when a leader controls the flow of information within the company, carefully deciding what data is shared and who gets access to sensitive information, akin to a gatekeeper who controls entry to a secure facility.

While these metaphors highlight the strength of autocratic leadership in maintaining control and ensuring coherent organizational direction, they also reveal limitations. For example, the strong, decisive leadership depicted by the “Leader as Sovereign” and “Leader as Captain” might overlook the importance of teamwork and subordinate autonomy, potentially leading to a lack of collaboration and innovation. On the other hand, the “Leader as Architect” and “Leader as Conductor” suggest a well-planned and harmonious organization but may imply rigidity and a lack of flexibility or creativity in approaches.

Moreover, while the “Leader as Gatekeeper” and “Leader as Guardian” emphasize the protective aspects of leadership, ensuring the organization’s security from harmful influences and maintaining the well-being of its members, they can also foster an overly protective or paternalistic environment. This might limit employees’ exposure to challenges and reduce opportunities for growth, as it could stifle innovation and independent thought.

In summary, these metaphors collectively enrich our understanding of autocratic leadership, highlighting the diverse roles a leader might assume - from a strategic planner to a protective steward. They also underscore the necessity for autocratic leaders to maintain flexibility, appreciate subordinate contributions, and remain open to different perspectives to balance effectively the potential downsides of this leadership style.

## REFERENCES

1. Chen, X.-P., Eberly, M. B., Chiang, T.-J., Farh, J.-L., & Cheng, B.-S. (2011). Affective Trust in Chinese Leaders: Linking Paternalistic Leadership to Employee Performance. *Journal of Management*, 40(3), 796-819.
2. Chu, L.-C. (2014). The moderating role of authoritarian leadership on the relationship between the internalization of emotional regulation and the well-being of employees. *Leadership*, 10(3), 326-343.
3. De Hoogh, A. H., Greer, L. L., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2015). Diabolical dictators or capable commanders? An investigation of the differential effects of autocratic leadership on team performance. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 26(5), 687-701.
4. Harms, P. D., Wood, D., Landay, K., Lester, P. B., & Lester, G. V. (2018). Autocratic leaders and authoritarian followers revisited: A review and agenda for the future. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 105-122.
5. Hinnebusch, R. (2006). Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique. *Democratization*, 13(3), 373-395.
6. Kiazad, K., Restubog, S. L., Zagenczyk, T. J., Kiewitz, C., & Tang, R. L. (2010). In pursuit of power: The role of authoritarian leadership in the relationship between supervisors' Machiavellianism and subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervisory behavior. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44(4), 512-519.
7. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.
8. Muhić, E. (2023). The Conceptualisation of Personable Villainy and Winsome Knaves: Enter Anakin Skywalker and Coriolanus Snow. *Filolog*, 14(28), 259-269.
9. Muhić, E. (2024). Within These Four Walls: The Perilousness of Elusive Guard Rails and Impermanence of Safety. *Filolog*, 15(29), 313-321.
10. Schuh, S. C., Zhang, X.-a., & Tian, P. (2012). For the Good or the Bad? Interactive Effects of Transformational Leadership with Moral

- and Authoritarian Leadership Behaviors. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 116, 629-640.
11. Wang, A.-C., Chiang, J. T.-J., Tsai, C.-Y., Lin, T.-T., & Cheng, B.-S. (2013). Gender makes the difference: The moderating role of leader gender on the relationship between leadership styles and subordinate performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 122(2), 101-113.
  12. Yildirim, E. K., Caki, C., & Harmanci, Y. (2020). Autocratic Leadership. In O. Demitras, & M. Karaca, *A Handbook of Leadership Styles* (pp. 294-310). Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.