

Metaphors of Authority: Kafka's *The Castle* in Discursive Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Discursive leadership—a concept rooted in communication and the co-construction of meaning—is particularly relevant when analyzing complex power dynamics in literature and historical systems. This paper examines the representation of power, hierarchy, and control in Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (Kafka, 1926/2009) through the lens of discursive leadership, where power is not merely an overt act, but rather a process negotiated through interactions and discourse. Kafka's bureaucratic structure in *The Castle* is not unlike the hierarchical systems found in 18th-century absolute monarchies, where authority was centralized and inaccessible, its workings opaque. Both in Kafka's novel and in historical monarchies, power appears elusive, with bureaucratic layers adding to the confusion and reinforcing the idea of an unreachable authority.

By examining the intersection of Kafka's metaphorical representation of power and the historical context of absolute monarchies, this study highlights the persistent themes of alienation, inefficiency, and control that resonate in both historical and modern administrative systems. In this context, discursive leadership becomes essential, as it is through communication—or the lack thereof—that power is maintained, challenged, or negotiated. This topic is timely because it reflects Kafka's critique of bureaucratic control and offers a lens through which contemporary organizational structures can be analyzed. Exploration of how power is discursively framed by Kafka provides insight into the modern realities of leadership and the challenges that arise from hierarchical structures in administrative and corporate systems today.

The analysis will address the following research questions: 1) How does Kafka's *The Castle* portray the dynamics of power and hierarchy through discursive leadership? 2) What parallels exist between Kafka's depiction of bureaucratic power and the structures of absolute monarchy in the 18th century? 3) How can the themes of alienation and inefficiency in Kafka's *The Castle* inform modern leadership theory in contemporary organizations? This paper aims to bridge literary analysis with leadership theory by addressing these questions and providing a comprehensive examination of how power operates across various contexts and periods.

Literature review: authority through time – Kafka's *Castle* and the evolution of administrative power

This section presents a conceptual and historical overview of administrative leadership, combining contemporary theoretical frameworks with a hermeneutic reflection on Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The review explores the evolving dynamics of modern bureaucratic leadership, as well as the symbolic parallels between Kafka's fictional bureaucracy and the absolute monarchies of 18th-century Europe.

Foundations and evolving dynamics of administrative leadership

Administrative leadership can be defined as the process of managing organizational and bureaucratic structures to coordinate actions and achieve public goals (Van Wart, 2013). Within this framework, administrative leaders play a crucial role in enforcing policies, managing human resources, and implementing regulations to ensure the effective functioning of various institutions. Administrative leadership focuses on decision-making processes, control mechanisms, and delegation within hierarchical power structures (Van Wart, 2013). The effectiveness of this type of leadership depends on the ability to manage relationships between institutions and citizens, as well as the ability to effectively navigate formal procedures and regulations (Kellough & Nigro, 2002).

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Administrative leadership also refers to guiding and influencing organizational activities to achieve specific goals, particularly within educational and administrative contexts. It can encompass various roles, including management, supervision, and innovation, while emphasizing the importance of trust, openness, and service to others. This leadership style is crucial for fostering a conducive environment that enhances organizational performance and quality.

The critical characteristics of administrative leadership include influence and guidance. Influential leaders must be able to influence group dynamics in ways that align with organizational objectives (Winarsih, 2022). Additionally, administrative leaders often take on diverse roles—such as those of educator, manager, or innovator—that are crucial to achieving organizational success (Winarsih, 2022). In academic settings, administrative leadership plays a crucial role in supporting scholarship by promoting undergraduate research and cultivating a culture of academic engagement, thereby enhancing student involvement and institutional reputation (Behling, 2022).

The impact of effective administrative leadership on organizational performance is evident in its ability to foster a culture of quality and innovation, and is linked to improvements in organizational performance, particularly due to its promotion of excellence and strategic direction (Nasseef, 2022). Effective leaders play a critical role in setting long-term goals and closely monitoring organizational performance to meet these objectives (Nasseef, 2022).

Discursive administrative leadership offers an alternative approach by emphasizing the role of communication and discourse in shaping organizational dynamics and decision-making. This approach integrates theories of social constructionism and systems theory, underscoring how leaders and followers co-create meaning through dialogue.

Discursive leadership relies on effective communication to influence organizational outcomes, framing decisions and managing meanings through dialogue (Clifton, 2014). It involves using various tools and techniques to empower followers and foster a collaborative environment that enhances organizational learning and innovation (Montaudon-Tomas et al., 2021).

Leaders employ discursive framing to address challenges—for example, handling illegitimate task requests, by reframing these tasks in ways that align with the organization's established norms (Minei & Cohen-Charash, 2018). The ability to frame situations effectively is crucial for maintaining authority and guiding followers through complex and uncertain circumstances (Minei, 2015). However, despite the emphasis in discursive administrative leadership on dialogue and the co-construction of meaning, ensuring that all voices are equally heard can be difficult. This may lead to power imbalances during decision-making processes.

In modern organizations, effective administrative leadership requires a comprehensive set of competencies that enable leaders to navigate the complexities of dynamic environments. As organizations encounter unprecedented challenges—from global crises to rapid technological advancements—leaders must continuously evolve their skill sets to ensure their organizations' resilience and success.

Leaders must cultivate emotional and social intelligence to foster collaboration and strengthen team cohesion (Raišienė, 2014). This competency enables leaders to effectively understand and regulate their emotions while engaging meaningfully with others—an essential trait, especially in high-pressure environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Hrynychak & Motuzka, 2023).

Leaders must manage change effectively, as they are responsible for steering their organizations through unpredictable and often volatile circumstances (Adero & Odiyo, 2020). Successful change management requires strategic foresight and the ability to inspire and motivate teams during transition periods, ensuring organizational alignment with new directions.

Strong communication skills are fundamental to leadership. They enable leaders to articulate their vision, set goals, and convey expectations clearly (Adero & Odiyo, 2020). This competency extends beyond merely conveying information; it also encompasses active listening and engaging in meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders, facilitating a more inclusive decision-making process.

Leaders must also demonstrate strong strategic thinking skills to navigate complex challenges and craft innovative solutions (Norton, 2004). This involves assessing trends, forecasting potential obstacles, and making informed decisions aligned with the organization's long-term objectives. While these competencies are essential, there is growing concern that an overreliance on technology might undermine the importance of interpersonal skills in leadership. Nevertheless, the human element remains irreplaceable, as effective leadership fundamentally depends on the ability to connect with and inspire individuals, regardless of any technological advances (Abah, 2017).

Kafka's bureaucratic culture and absolute power structures: the example of *The Castle* and 18th-century monarchies

A critical period in the development of the administrative model, which influenced state structures for centuries, was the rise of monarchical power in 18th-century Europe. Through his narrative, Kafka offers a profound reflection on the nature of power, allowing readers to view that era from a new perspective. *The Castle* is a work rich in symbolism, full of hidden meanings. The

author tells the story of a wanderer who arrives in a village at the foot of a mysterious castle on a cold winter evening. From an administrative perspective, the village plays a crucial role as an institution upon which everything depends—much like the central monarchical authorities that dictated the fate of their subjects in that era. Kafka depicts the eponymous Castle as a source of unattainable power to which the village is both near and distant, serving as a metaphor for the complex relationships between power and society.

The novel's protagonist, K., claims to be a land surveyor employed by the Castle, but not all the villagers are convinced that he is who he claims to be. Doubts are quickly dispelled by a letter from Klamm, the head of the office, and the fact that the Castle assigns him two assistants. Nonetheless, K. proves unnecessary as an official because no one in the village requires the services of a land surveyor, despite having earlier considered employing such a person. Determined, K. repeatedly attempts to establish contact with the higher authorities of the Castle to confirm his role. Here, as in the 18th century, the higher monarchical authorities are the central reference point. At that time, the highest levels of the administrative hierarchy were decisive—much like the Castle in the novel, which serves as the ultimate authority over the protagonist's fate.

The protagonist's attempts to establish contact with the Castle seem utterly futile. The Castle appears as an inaccessible, mysterious, and immense place, and its absolute and unattainable power creates a similar impression in the administrative model. Very little is known about the ruler of the Castle, Count Westwest, and the actual power lies in the hands of the local administration—namely, the officials and the enigmatic Mr. Klamm. The bureaucrats and Castle servants differ significantly from the villagers, further complicating their relations. The Castle's officials rarely speak, and their words are typically terse and uninformative. Communication is primarily conducted through notes and messages, which are frequently lost, intensifying the chaos and distance between the administration and the individual.

Like a monarchy, a certain majesty exists in the Castle's authority, imposing obedience and maintaining a sense of distance. Women and many other groups are highly subjugated, and their resistance to poor treatment can lead to total social degradation. The Castle, a distant and unreachable institution, operates according to its impenetrable rules. It possesses an almost divine quality, highlighting its untouchability and isolation from the rest of the world. Even though the Castle's administration does not employ K., the protagonist must remain constantly ready, feeling compelled to follow the invisible rules of this authority, as if his very existence depends on meeting these demands.

As K. encounters more obstacles and difficulties, it becomes increasingly clear that the Castle's bureaucracy is perceived as infallible, with errors impossible: "There are no offices other than supervisory ones. Indeed, they are not only there to uncover mistakes in the usual sense of the word, since such mistakes do not occur. Even if a mistake does arise, as in your case, who can ultimately judge that it is a mistake?" (Kafka, p. 2) Every attempt K. makes to reach the Castle, understand its functioning, and change his destiny fails. He struggles against a mysterious, unattainable power, and his efforts ultimately come to nothing. He lacks the strength to overcome the invisible but all-encompassing bureaucratic machinery that surrounds and entraps him, rendering him powerless in the face of its immense force.

This type of distant authority is difficult to comprehend, as it holds immense power. At the same time, the individual is separated from it by a complex network of intermediary agencies, institutions, and bodies. Even access to the Castle's offices, as in the case of the messenger Barnabas, seems limited and unclear: "And even if the offices belong to the Castle, are they the offices to which Barnabas has access?" (Kafka, 2009, p. 144). This raises a critical question: Where does true power reside here, and who truly wields it? In the context of administration, who stands behind this elusive structure of monarchical authority? This paper will attempt to answer this question by analyzing the selected administrative model. Particular emphasis will be placed on the individual's relationship to hierarchy and the power of institutions that shape and control human life.

The metaphor of Kafka's *The Castle* draws on the example of monarchies and the power relations that existed within them. Perfect examples of absolute monarchies that reflected in the novel's depiction include France under the reign of the "Sun King," Louis XIV, whose famous declaration, "*L'état, c'est moi*" ("I am the state"), epitomizes absolutism (Mansel, 2006). Similar examples include the Prussian monarchy, the Habsburg Empire, and Russia under the rule of Peter the Great. Each of these monarchies had a centralization of power and hierarchical administrative structure reminiscent of the inaccessibility and omnipotence of the Kafka's Castle, with relationships between the individual and the administration as complex and distanced as those between K. and the Castle.

Absolute monarchy was characterized by a division of state administration among independent ministries; however, these ministries were ultimately controlled by the absolute monarch, negating the notion of their true independence. Councils, functioning as collegial bodies, oversaw each ministry. A defining feature of absolute monarchy was this collegiality, which aimed to limit individual decision-making and curb the ambitions of prominent officials. The belief that collegiality led to delays in administrative processes, increased costs, and jurisdictional disputes eventually led to its replacement by single-person

authorities. As a result, the number of ministries and their personnel increased. While these ministries were initially intended to operate on principles of equality, this balance proved unsustainable over time. The most significant ministries became those of the police and treasury.

Absolute monarchy was also characterized by centralization, whereby lower-level authorities were subordinated to higher-level bodies. This system aimed to create personal dependency with regard to the appointment of individuals to civil service positions and assessing their qualifications while they were in office. This led to hierarchical dependency in the issuance and enforcement of official directives. The hierarchical nature of the system ensured that lower bodies were subordinate to higher ones, all the way up to the central authority. This dependency was reinforced by religious doctrines that emphasized the monarch's divine right. Consequently, the monarch's will, regarded as divinely ordained, was transmitted through the hierarchically structured state apparatus.

To consolidate absolute power over society and strengthen the state, a robust police force and a powerful military were established. The demands of the military, along with the expanding needs of the administrative apparatus, saw a growing number of lower-ranking civil service positions, which led to the introduction of compulsory primary education for children. To balance control policies and maintain order, the monarch devoted considerable attention to implementing various state reforms, particularly in education and patronage of the arts and culture. All these efforts aimed to create the image of an enlightened ruler who cared for the state's well-being while ensuring its strength and recognition on the international stage.

The 18th century is often considered, in combination with the latter half of the 17th century, as the era of absolutism (Beik, 2010). Absolutism represented a transitional phase from the fragmentation of feudalism to the emergence of centralized states. Early modern monarchies arose from overcoming the dualism between princely authority and the privileges of estates and regions. This process, which spanned several centuries, was characterized by the gradual consolidation of power by monarchs, particularly during the 15th and 16th centuries, when national monarchies began to emerge. The formation of these centralized states was heavily influenced by strategic negotiations between monarchs and the elites, a dynamic that varied significantly across different regions of Western Europe (Eyck, 1993; Wittrock, 1998).

While royal absolutism emerged as a powerful political force during the 17th and 18th centuries, the relationship between monarchs and regional elites remained complex. The interplay between central authority and local privileges shaped state-building efforts throughout this period (Montcher, 2020). The constant state of warfare, which characterized much of early modern Europe, played a pivotal role in this process as monarchs sought to strengthen their power and secure the loyalty of the elites. In turn, elites actively negotiated their position within the evolving political structure, sometimes challenging or supporting the central authority depending on regional circumstances (Montcher, 2020). These interactions between monarchs and elites were crucial in shaping the political landscape of Western Europe, and contributed to the rise of absolutism and the transformation of political systems during the early modern period.

Complex interactions between monarchs, nobility, and other elite groups influenced the development of absolutism in early modern Europe. During this period of financial and military consolidation, monarchs strengthened their sovereignty over estates and provinces. They established their power apparatus by appointing court dignitaries and creating royal councils. These dignitaries often held lifetime positions, and their authority was frequently hereditary. In the context of feudal relationships and privileges, they carved out their autonomy. Some countries, such as England and Sweden, experienced early phases of absolutism that were later overcome, leading to more constitutional forms of government (Salter & Young, 2018). This shift away from absolutism can be attributed, in part, to the structure of representative assemblies, where mixed representation provided a more effective check on monarchical power than in estate-based systems (Salter & Young, 2018). In England, conflicts among elites led to monarchs achieving national-level hegemony; in the process, however, the monarchs simultaneously lost control over local resources, rendering them vulnerable to class-based uprisings and limiting their capacity for absolutist rule (Lachmann, 1989).

On the other hand, in France, elite conflicts facilitated the consolidation of absolutism, as the monarchy successfully incorporated elite factions into the state structure, strengthening central authority (Lachmann, 1989). These varying experiences across Europe contributed to the development of different state forms, including patrimonial absolutism, bureaucratic constitutionalism, and bureaucratic absolutism—each shaped by the complex historical processes at play (Gorski & Ertman, 1998).

From a legal perspective, these nations represented a mosaic of unrestricted and limited monarchies. Specific unfortunate terms arose about larger states, which led to the adoption of Aristotle's concept of "mixed government." A monarchy is a state where representative bodies minimally restrict the hereditary ruler, and the monarch's favor determines the appointment or dismissal of high-ranking officials. In contrast, an oligarchy is a state with no hereditary ruler or representative bodies in which dignitaries significantly constrain the ruler. Examples of constitutional oligarchies, where sovereignty is concentrated in the hands of a few dignitaries, was primarily found in city-states. In the 18th century, in cases where the monarch's power was

heavily limited, an oligarchy of wealthy families often held de facto governance. These families controlled key positions through manipulated elections and possessed enough influence to oppose the monarch's will.

The structure of the absolute state was such that, under an ineffective ruler, a trusted individual governed on the monarch's behalf. The relationships, dynamics, and dependencies within monarchies and oligarchies during the 18th century were complex. Historians point to dynastic factors and the personalities of individual monarchs as key influences. Absolute monarchy proved to be the most effective means of ensuring military power for the state, and representative bodies were particularly active in wealthy countries—especially those with access to the sea or where a powerful aristocracy had emerged.

The reign of Louis XVI in France (1774-1792) represented a pivotal moment in the expansion and subsequent crisis of absolutism. While the period is often characterized as having had economic growth and efforts at reform within the absolutist framework, the French monarchy faced increasing challenges both within and outside the system (Rostworowski, 1999). The state strategically leveraged privileges to foster innovation and support economic development, presenting an image of a dynamic, albeit rigid, monarchy (Shovlin, 2017). However, beneath this surface of apparent stability, the monarchy struggled with rising challenges to personal rule and the emerging ideas of national identity that would come to define the revolutionary period (Swann & Felix, 2013). This evolving political climate was reflected in changes to the legal system, where new methods of publishing judgments and interpreting laws began to emerge, as demonstrated by the *Gazette des Tribunaux* (Halpérin, 2011).

Monarchies were generally more open to individual advancement. It was not uncommon for new individuals and foreigners to rise to prominence at the courts of absolute rulers. The oligarchic elites were more exclusive, although opportunities for civic advancement began to emerge in states with parliamentary institutions. The political aspirations of the bourgeoisie increasingly focused on civil liberties and formal equality before the law.

When analyzing the 18th century in the context of administrative expansion across Euro-pean states, the processes of centralization and specialization become evident. As Waters (1989) has argued, Weber's concept of collegiality provides valuable insights into the relationship between professionalization and bureaucratization. Collegialism was one of the predominant forms of governance in the 18th century. It emerged as a transitional form between the feudal system and constitutionalism, distinguishing the competencies of representative bodies from those of the executive bureaucracy. The collegial structure served as a means of preventing excessive power concentration and ensuring continuity during times of crisis.

In this context, Lazega (2005) argues that modern societies experience two conflicting trends: continued Weberian rationalization through bureaucratization, and rationalization through collegiality, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors. In the collegial system, the roles of office and council were intertwined. Administrative collegial bodies conducted votes and passed resolutions by majority rule. In monarchies, these resolutions were recommendations the monarch could accept or reject. Lower-level colleagues were subordinate to higher ones, with the final decision on appointments resting with the monarch. Thus, administrative collegiality in monarchies did not function as part of an autonomous self-governing body, but rather as advisory and executive organs.

Simultaneously, some countries, such as France, developed military-style administrative systems. In theory, this system was centralized, but in practice, individual officials often exercised more initiative and independence than the presidents of the administrative college, who were nominally accountable to the monarch. Across Europe, administrative centralization and specialization progressed amid the overlapping territorial and functional competencies of various offices and institutions (Rostworowski, 1999). Regardless of these structural relationships, Kafka's *The Castle* vividly illustrates the individual's helplessness in the face of such an impenetrable power system.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutic approach grounded in metaphor analysis and discursive leadership theory. At the center of the analysis is Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, which serves as a literary case study and conceptual model for exploring complex power relations within bureaucratic and organizational systems. Rather than conducting a traditional linguistic discourse analysis, the article interprets literary metaphors as conceptual tools that enable deeper reflection on the dynamics of leadership, hierarchy, and alienation.

The study's method is based on close reading of selected narrative scenes and symbolic representations of authority in *The Castle*. These are examined alongside historical analogs, particularly the administrative and political models of 18th-century absolutist monarchies, such as those of France or the Habsburg Empire. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a critical

dialogue between literature, leadership theory, and administrative history, situating Kafka's symbolic vision within both historical and contemporary contexts.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Franz Kafka's *The Castle* depict power and hierarchy through the lens of discursive leadership?
2. What parallels can be drawn between the bureaucratic structures in *The Castle* and models of absolute monarchy in the 18th century?
3. How can metaphors for alienation and inefficiency in Kafka's novel enrich the understanding of leadership theory in modern organizations?

The theoretical foundation of this study is the concept of discursive leadership, which understands leadership not as a fixed position or set of commands, but as a process of meaning-making, co-construction, and negotiation through discourse (Clifton, 2012; Montaudon-Tomas et al., 2021). Authority is not simply imposed from above; rather, it is continuously shaped, challenged, and reproduced through communication, narrative structures, and symbolic interactions.

Within this framework, Kafka's literary metaphors—such as the Castle itself, the figure of K., the inaccessible bureaucracy, and the shifting roles of officials—are interpreted as epistemic devices that reflect and critique the power mechanisms of contemporary institutions. These metaphors illuminate how power can be experienced as both omnipresent and obscure, alienating and legitimizing, and ultimately offer a nuanced model of how discursive leadership functions in complex, hierarchical environments.

RESULTS

This hermeneutic, metaphor-centered analysis of Franz Kafka's *The Castle* offers a cohesive interpretive framework for understanding how power is constructed, experienced, and sustained within systems governed by discursive leadership. Through a close reading of Kafka's symbolic narrative, the novel emerges not only as a literary work but as an epistemic model of modern organizational life—one that reveals the inherent paradoxes and contradictions of bureaucratic authority.

Hermeneutics of bureaucratic power through Kafka

At the core of the narrative lies the metaphor of the Castle itself, an omnipresent yet unreachable structure of power. Despite being physically located at the heart of the village, the Castle is symbolically distant, inaccessible, and shrouded in mystery. This spatial metaphor captures the condition of leadership in many contemporary organizations, where authority is embedded in invisible hierarchies and administrative rituals. In such systems, leadership is experienced not through direct interaction but through its absence—through what is not said, what is not clarified, and what is never delivered. Kafka further constructs power through the Castle's silences, delays, and fragmented communication. Letters are lost, officials remain unnamed or absent, and bureaucratic messages arrive too late or not at all. These features simulate a leadership environment defined not by clarity but by ambiguity. Meaning is indirectly negotiated, and authority manifests through obscure procedures. The result is a form of leadership that is performative and textual—carried by documents, formalities, and gestures—rather than relational or dialogical in nature.

Within this structure, the protagonist K. exemplifies the figure of the alienated organizational subject. His efforts to gain recognition and clarity within the Castle's hierarchy are consistently undermined by contradiction and exclusion. Though he is formally "included," he is functionally displaced, reflecting the way many institutions today offer symbolic forms of participation while withholding genuine access to influence or agency. This alienation is not accidental but integral to the system's operation, producing compliance through ongoing interpretive engagement, no matter how futile.

By revealing the incoherence and inaccessibility of the bureaucratic discourse, Kafka also exposes the paradox of discursive leadership itself. While this leadership model assumes that meaning emerges from interaction and negotiation, Kafka's world suggests that such processes can just as easily lead to paralysis and disempowerment. When discourse lacks transparency, co-construction becomes a space of confusion rather than collaboration. The very mechanisms intended to include may, under certain structural conditions, reinforce exclusion.

Finally, the symbolic critique is deepened through historical analogy. Kafka's fictional bureaucracy is structurally reminiscent of 18th-century absolutist monarchies, where centralization, hierarchical layering, and ritualized distance served to maintain an image of infallible, divinely-ordained authority. This analogy reveals how modern bureaucracies, despite their secular and rational appearance, may reproduce the symbolic logic of monarchic power, rendering their leadership both intangible and unchallengeable.

Through this hermeneutic reading, *The Castle* emerges as a powerful metaphor for the dynamics of power in modern institutions, a system where language, structure, and symbolism converge to produce a form of leadership that is neither entirely present nor absent, neither inclusive nor exclusive, but persistently ambiguous. Kafka's metaphors thus offer not only a literary critique, but a theoretical contribution to the understanding of authority in contemporary organizational life.

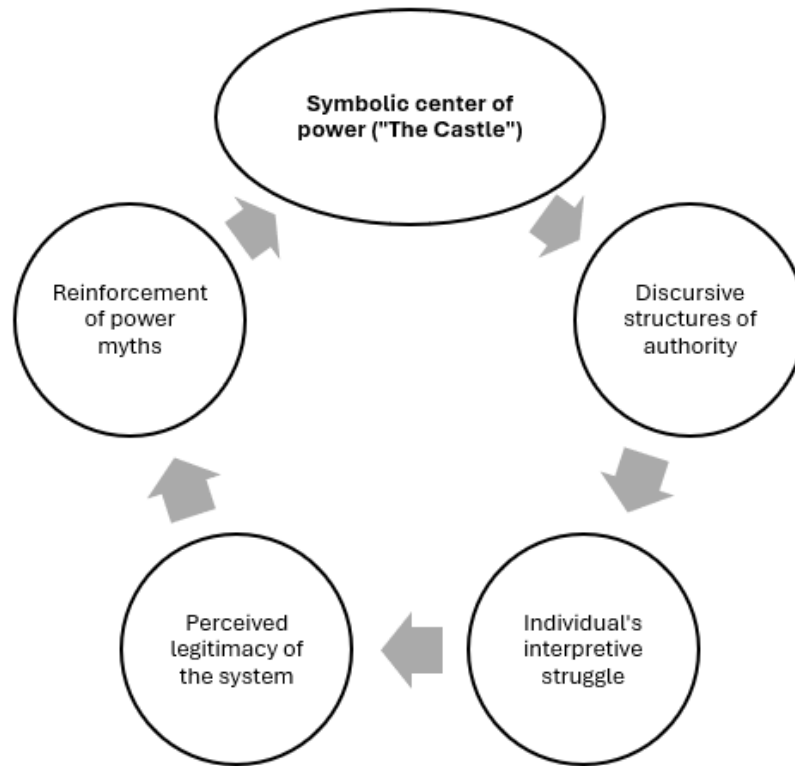


Figure 1. Kafka's hermeneutic circle of power

Source: Own description

Figure 1 presents Kafka's hermeneutic circle of power, an interpretative model of discursive authority inspired by *The Castle*. The diagram visualizes five interrelated stages, through which power is constructed, maintained, and legitimized within Kafka's metaphorical bureaucracy. Beginning with the symbolic center of power—the inaccessible Castle—the model illustrates how discursive structures, such as silence, procedural delay, and fragmentation, create an environment where individuals struggle to understand their role within the system. This interpretive effort, in turn, reinforces the perceived legitimacy of authority and sustains the myth of its infallibility. The process is circular and self-perpetuating, illustrating how ambiguous leadership is reproduced not through direct coercion, but through narrative, ritual, and symbolic exclusion. The figure offers a conceptual lens for understanding the paradoxes of power in both Kafka's fiction and contemporary organizational structures.

Metaphors of power in Kafka's literature as discursive leadership

Franz Kafka, one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, frequently explored the themes of power, bureaucracy, and individual alienation within societal systems in his works. His stories and novels, such as *The Trial* (1925/2009), *The Castle* (1926/2009), and *The Metamorphosis* (1915/2005), profoundly reflect the nature of power in both its direct and symbolic forms. From the perspective of leadership discourse, Kafka does not present power as a linear process of domination. Instead, he portrays it as a space of continuous negotiation and relational dynamics, in which actors—those at the top of the hierarchy and those subordinated to it—are entangled in a multidimensional system of mutual dependency and resistance.

Franz Kafka's literature marks a significant departure from traditional realism, embodying a modernist rebellion emphasizing existential struggle and a pervasive sense of irreality (Danish, 2021). Kafka's simple, precise language contrasts sharply with the elaborate style typically associated with realist literature, further distancing his work from conventional narrative forms (Danish,

2021). At the same time, his works are deeply rooted in his cultural context, drawing on Jewish folk traditions and engaging with German-Jewish literary discourse, which shaped his distinctive approach to community and identity (Fortmann, 2009). Through shared literary experiences, Kafka challenges societal norms while prompting readers to reflect on more profound philosophical questions about existence and structure, making his work both profound and resistant to simple categorization (Fortmann, 2009). One of the critical elements in Kafka's depiction of power is bureaucracy, which functions as an almost omnipresent force shaping the lives of his characters. The term "Kafkaesque" has even entered the lexicon. This concept refers to absurd, senseless situations filled with bureaucratic complications and characterized by the individual's sense of powerlessness in the face of the system. Such scenarios are often marked by a claustrophobic mood and oppressive atmosphere, a signature of Kafka's style and themes, and is particularly evident in works like *The Trial* and *The Castle* (Oxford Dictionary, 2024).

In *The Trial*, Joseph K. becomes entangled in an impenetrable web of formal procedures that appear to lack a clear decision-making center. In this bureaucratic setting, power is not concentrated in a single individual or institution, but rather dispersed throughout the system. This diffusion of power is critical to understanding Kafka's discourse on leadership—power, as depicted here, is not simply a tool of control, but also simultaneously the product of ongoing negotiations between individuals and structures. In this sense, Kafka's bureaucracy mirrors contemporary theories of power, such as those proposed by Michel Foucault, who argued that power does not operate exclusively from the top down but is embedded within all social relations, in which it is produced and reproduced through daily interactions (Foucault, 1977).

Leadership in Kafka's universe is not a straightforward concept. Characters such as Klammer in *The Castle* or the anonymous judges in *The Trial* symbolize nearly unattainable and omnipresent power. The protagonists, eager to understand the nature of this power, continually attempt to approach it, navigating their position within a hierarchy that appears to lack clear boundaries. Therefore, Kafka's metaphor of leadership rejects traditional notions of power as something stable and definitively assigned. Instead, he presents power as a dynamic process that is never fully closed, and always open to redefinition and change. In Kafka's world, power is not something one possesses, but instead is continuously negotiated—often in subtle, hidden, and unpredictable ways.

Just as power is elusive, so are the relationships between Kafka's characters, which are not based on a classical hierarchical model. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. seeks to understand his situation through interactions with various representatives of the system—clerks, lawyers, and priests—yet none of these figures offer him clear answers or resolutions. Each relationship K. establishes deepens his uncertainty and confusion, while the bureaucratic system appears opaque and elusive. This ambiguous and open-to-interpretation depiction of power relationships suggests that, in Kafka's world, power is neither straightforward nor a matter of passive submission. Rather, it is a process of continuous attempts to understand and control the situation, aligning closely with contemporary understandings of leadership as a negotiation between various social actors.

The metaphors of power in Kafka's works suggest a form of omnipresent oppression that is not overtly brutal, but rather subtle and all-encompassing. A vital example of this can be seen in how Kafka depicts the physical architecture of bureaucracy in his texts. In *The Castle*, the Castle itself, as the seat of power, remains inaccessible and unattainable for the protagonist, K. This space symbolizes the distance and lack of understanding between those who govern and those who are governed. In their attempts to access this power, Kafka's characters face constant obstacles, delays, and a lack of information. These metaphors convey Kafka's profound pessimism about the ability to comprehend or influence systems of power. The Castle is a structure that exists, but whose essence is beyond the reach of ordinary individuals.

In the context of leadership as discourse, Kafka's bureaucracy can be viewed as a space where every social actor is both a subject and an object of power. Supervisors may appear omnipotent, but they, too, are subordinated to higher levels of hierarchy that are equally inaccessible and unpredictable. In this way, leadership becomes decentralized and fragmented. No one holds complete control, and everyone is entangled in mechanisms of power that they cannot fully understand or govern. Kafka's depiction of power is distancing; leaders and those they govern are separated by impenetrable walls of the bureaucratic machine, and the role of each participant remains unclear and fluid.

From this perspective, Kafka challenges traditional notions of leadership as a unified act of domination. In his works, power does not stem from a leader's ability or charisma, but rather from an ongoing interplay of relations and negotiations that never lead to complete clarity or resolution. Characters such as Joseph K. or the protagonist of *The Castle* attempt to operate within this system, but their actions are constantly constrained by structures that are at once omnipotent, impenetrable, and, at times, absurd. This tension between the desire to understand and the impossibility of grasping the essence of power is a central element of Kafka's reflection on leadership.

Kafka portrays power as a profoundly complex phenomenon that is neither inherently good nor bad, but rather represents an ongoing challenge for the individual. His depiction of bureaucracy as an omnipresent yet impenetrable system reflects a profound pessimism about the possibility of controlling social reality. In this sense, the discourse of leadership in Kafka's literature is

not a simple act of governance, but rather a profound reflection on how power operates in the individual's everyday life. The negotiations around understanding and accepting this can become sources of alienation and frustration. Both metaphorically and in real terms, power constantly eludes Kafka's characters, making their leadership experience futile and tragic.

In *The Castle*, Kafka's depiction of power becomes even more enigmatic than in his other works, transforming into an elusive and paradoxical force that dominates the protagonist's life, yet remains unattainable and impossible to comprehend. The Castle, which serves as the central symbol in this text, represents both a metaphor for power and an object of unceasing desire. K. arrives in the village below the Castle, seeking acceptance and recognition within the bureaucratic structure that the Castle represents. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the Castle is neither a place that can be reached, nor an institution that can be directly confronted. This distancing of power and its inaccessibility to the individual heightens its metaphors, making it especially poignant within leadership discourse.

In contrast to simpler models of hierarchy, *The Castle* presents power that is structurally complex and simultaneously lacking transparency. As K. attempts to establish contact with the Castle's officials, he encounters a bureaucratic labyrinth characterized by delays, chaos, and conflicting information. Foster (2023) points out that bureaucratic rituals create aesthetic forms of power that; as in *The Castle*, these legitimize abstract structures through everyday symbolic practices. The messages K. receives are never definitive or clear, and decisions seem to be made arbitrarily. Power functions in a state of constant flux and displacement, never providing a complete answer to the questions posed by the protagonist. As a metaphor for power, the Castle becomes a symbol of hierarchical structure—a system that precludes the possibility of complete understanding and participation.

Essential to analyzing power in *The Castle* is the role of interpersonal relationships, which are shaped by the ambiguous status of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Every character K. encounters seems connected to the Castle and its officials, yet their positions and influence remain opaque. Officials like Klammer are almost mythical figures, surrounded by an aura of inaccessibility and ambiguity. Every attempt to make direct contact with power proves unsuccessful, underscoring the profound distance between the individual and the system. Kafka demonstrates that power, much like the Castle, is symbolically remote—denying direct interaction, always remaining in mediated communication, and full of false leads and intricacies.

Table 1. Leadership, illustrated through Kafka's *The Castle*

<i>The Castle</i>	Example of administrative leadership
"The Castle has enormous power, but no one can explain what it consists of, and all attempts to approach it only lead to greater uncertainty and confusion."	Discursive leadership is represented by individuals continuously negotiating their positions within a complex hierarchy. Leaders and followers alike are caught in ambiguous power dynamics, where the rules are unclear, and authority is decentralized. This creates an ongoing process of negotiation, where leadership is not established through clear acts of control, but rather is an interaction shaped by constant reinterpretation of the situation.
"It is characteristic of this authority that the nearer someone is to it, the less he notices its existence, while those who are farthest away from it can make its power the subject of their constant thought."	Power is not exerted through direct action, but through distant, subtle mechanisms. Leaders do not exercise direct control, but their influence is felt indirectly through complex layers of intermediaries. This reflects a discursive leadership model, in which authority is dispersed and felt through relationships rather than direct commands.
"There's no definite policy to guide the officials, and no way of judging what they do, and the usual result is simply paralysis."	This quote illustrates the inefficiency and paralysis that can occur when discursive leadership becomes too ambiguous. Without clear guidelines or accountability, leadership becomes ineffective, highlighting the importance of clarity and structure within discursive processes.

Source: quoted from: Kafka, F. (1926). *The Castle*. (M. Harman, Trans.). Schocken Books.

On a metaphorical level, the Castle can be interpreted as a reflection of the absurd nature of power, which never fully reveals itself nor offers real solutions. The Castle embodies bureaucratic power, which governs not only the individual but entire communities—such as the village in which K. seeks to find his place. Despite being physically close to the Castle, the villagers seem just as disconnected from its power as K. The bureaucratic machine governing the village operates based on principles that few people truly understand or can explain. Every individual is entangled in a web of dependencies and formalities, the meaning and purpose of which are never clearly defined.

In this context, Kafka's depiction of power in *The Castle* can be seen as a profound critique of modern power structures, which, while dominating the lives of individuals, remain inaccessible and impenetrable. The discourse of leadership here is reduced to an absurd struggle to gain access to structures that are themselves chaotic and incomprehensible. Power ceases to be a simple relationship of subordination, and instead becomes a system in which individuals are forced into perpetual uncertainty, trying to understand rules that do not exist. Like other bureaucratic structures in his works, Kafka's Castle embodies the distance and alienation that accompany power relations in the modern world, while highlighting the individual's helplessness in the face of oppressive yet undefined mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

In Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, power is portrayed as an elusive and apparently infallible force that governs the individual's life while denying them any complete understanding of its mechanisms. The power structure in *The Castle* lacks a clear center, and the bureaucratic system the protagonist, K., attempts to navigate operates through perpetual delays, obscure procedures, and contradictory information. Every attempt to approach this authority fails, illustrating the individual's profound frustration with the bureaucratic system. The system is characterized by ambiguity, contradictions, and perpetual delays, reflecting a world where power and authority are neither transparent nor accessible (Caygill, 2019; Kempner, 1989). The novel disrupts traditional notions of organizational structure, presenting the system as chaotic and random rather than a rationally organized hierarchy (Caygill, 2019). In this context, the protagonist, K., struggles to navigate a world where bureaucratic procedures are opaque and filled with confusing, often contradictory information (Kempner, 1989). This mirrors the challenges individuals face when attempting to enter and function within complex bureaucratic systems, such as educational administration, where they encounter similar obstacles of delay and miscommunication.

The power structure in *The Castle* lacks a clear center, and authority is diffused through texts, directives, and fragmented narratives rather than a unified or easily identifiable source (Goozé, 1983). This disjointedness leaves the characters—and, by extension, the readers—struggling with the instability of knowledge and the impossibility of fully comprehending the system they inhabit. Kafka's narrative demands an active, questioning engagement from both its characters and its readers, emphasizing the problematic nature of textual interpretation and the complexities inherent in attempting to understand systems that resist straightforward analysis (Goozé, 1983; Tomkins, 2019). In a "post-truth" era, where information is often distorted or selectively presented, *The Castle* resonates with striking relevance, illustrating how complex systems and narratives can trap individuals in cycles of confusion, uncertainty, and interpretation (Tomkins, 2019). Harsin (2024) argues that "post-truth" is a socio-epistemic state based on anxiety and communicative rituals, which complements this image of power as not so much faked, but allowing for uncertainty and symbolic boundaries.

In *The Castle*, power is not exerted through overt actions, but through subtle signals and complex relationships that continuously compel individuals to try to understand its nature. This diffuse form of control is oppressive; despite the protagonist K.'s persistent efforts to seek clarity, he is only met with further confusion and alienation. The novel highlights the existential struggle of navigating a system that resists comprehension, reinforcing that bureaucracy can be a mechanism of control that traps individuals in an endless cycle of misunderstanding.

Kafka's portrayal of power also explores its relationship with animality, suggesting that human caring and the attempt to understand can paradoxically become grounds for totalizing control (Balázs, 2015). In this light, the bureaucratic apparatus in *The Castle* can be understood as a form of despotism, one that exercises control not through brute force but through a pervasive, insidious system that manipulates individuals into seeking answers that only deepen their sense of powerlessness (Löwy, 2004). This critique of bureaucratic power presents a chilling reflection on the nature of authority and governance, where the desire for understanding becomes a tool of oppression. Despite the protagonists' tireless efforts to make sense of the system, they are continuously confronted with further confusion, reinforcing the alienation from living under such an incomprehensible form of control. As the central seat of authority, the Castle becomes a symbol of unattainable power whose operations defy rational analysis.

Kafka's notion of the infallibility of power is demonstrated by the impossibility of recognizing or rectifying errors within the bureaucratic system. Even when mistakes are identified, no institution can effectively address them, and the system continues to function uninterrupted. Kafka suggests that power in such a system is self-sustaining and does not require external validation; any attempt to resist or comprehend its operations leads only to further alienation of the individual.

Thus, Kafka's *The Castle* provides a metaphor for unreachable power and the paradoxical reality in which individuals are forced to function under such power. It depicts a world where all actions, even those rational and logical, are doomed to fail when confronted with oppressive and ungraspable power structures. Kafka successfully conveys a profound sense of futility, emphasizing the absurdity and inefficacy of human agency in the face of such omnipresent and impersonal systems of authority. This reflection on power evolves into a broader critique of modern bureaucratic systems, where individuals are perpetually alienated from decision-making processes and trapped in endless cycles of miscommunication and inefficiency.

Future research could explore several critical areas in the context of discursive leadership as depicted in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. There is potential for investigating how individuals attempt to negotiate their position within hierarchical power structures despite lacking direct access to the source of power. The relationships between power and the individual, as shown in Kafka's bureaucratic system, offer valuable insights into the functioning of modern organizations, where formal structures and procedures often hold more influence than the direct actions of leaders.

There are also new avenues for research into the symbolic and narrative dimensions of leadership in institutional contexts, particularly in relation to ambiguity, legitimacy, and discursive control. Recent research by Tomkins (2024) expands the metaphorical framework of Kafka's *The Castle* by showing how its discursive structure anticipates key features of contemporary leadership in so-called "post-truth" environments. Her analysis suggests that Kafka's narrative form—marked by ambiguity, misrecognition, and unresolvable authority—serves as a warning for populist leadership styles that obscure legitimacy through narrative control. On the other hand, Edwards, Kempster, and Cunliffe (2023) argue for re-imagining leadership beyond the bureaucratic and hierarchical paradigm, advocating for dialogical, relational models of leadership that challenge exclusionary structures. Their work offers a meaningful contrast to Kafka's fictional world by proposing alternatives that foster inclusion and sense-making through co-constructed discourse.

Another critical area for further study is the analysis of how different forms of communication—both direct and indirect—shape followers' perceptions of authority. Discursive leadership in *The Castle* serves as a metaphor for the absence of effective communication and exemplifies how ambiguity and a lack of transparency can strengthen power by fostering feelings of uncertainty and dependence. Research on how contemporary organizations use such techniques to manage employee perceptions would be a valuable direction to pursue.

Lastly, future research could also focus on the role of emotions in the context of discursive leadership. In Kafka's work, emotions such as fear, frustration, and helplessness are central to interactions with bureaucratic power structures. Understanding how emotions shape leader-follower relationships and how leaders can use discourse to manage emotions within an organization could provide new insights into power dynamics in professional settings. Exploring these topics in further research would provide a deeper understanding of the literary and practical dimensions of discursive leadership and its relevance to contemporary organizational and bureaucratic structures.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of *The Castle*, approached through the lens of discursive leadership and metaphor theory, offers new insights into the nature of power, authority, and organizational complexity. By integrating literary interpretation with leadership studies, this article demonstrates how fictional narratives can serve as powerful analytical tools for understanding bureaucratic structures in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Q1) How does Franz Kafka's *The Castle* depict power and hierarchy through the lens of discursive leadership?

Kafka presents power not as a top-down, centralized force, but as a diffused and opaque system, constantly negotiated through fragmented discourse and ambiguous relationships. Characters such as K. engage in continuous attempts to define their position within a structure that is inaccessible and resistant to interpretation. This aligns with discursive leadership, where meaning is not imposed but co-constructed, and where authority emerges from communication, miscommunication, and relational dynamics. Charismatic individuals do not exercise leadership in *The Castle*. Authority instead materializes through bureaucratic rituals, silence, delays, and elusive texts, making it an ideal metaphor for ambiguous, processual leadership in complex organizations.

Q2) What parallels exist between Kafka's fictional bureaucratic power and historical structures of absolute monarchy in the 18th century?

Kafka's portrayal of the Castle mirrors the inaccessibility, centralization, and hierarchical distance found in 18th-century absolutist monarchies. Just as monarchic power was concentrated yet obscured by layers of intermediaries and protocols, the Castle functions as a center of authority that cannot be directly accessed or fully understood. Kafka's officials, especially figures like Klammer, resemble courtiers or ministers of monarchies, whose symbolic proximity to power only served to reinforce their actual remoteness. The analogy highlights how bureaucratic systems, both fictional and historical, reproduce control by keeping power intentionally vague and structurally distant from the governed.

Q3) How can the themes of alienation and inefficiency in *The Castle* enrich our understanding of leadership theory in contemporary organizational contexts?

Kafka's metaphors of alienation and inefficiency reveal how modern organizations may inadvertently replicate oppressive structures when they prioritize proceduralism over clarity, control over communication, and hierarchy over accessibility. In today's administrative and corporate systems, employees may experience the same feelings of helplessness, disorientation, and frustration as Kafka's protagonist. By engaging with these metaphors, leadership theorists can gain a deeper understanding of how discursive failures—such as broken communication loops, inaccessible decision-making processes, or contradictory

instructions—can erode trust, foster disengagement, and ultimately weaken organizational effectiveness. Kafka thus serves not only as a literary voice of critique, but also as a visionary of organizational dynamics whose insights remain strikingly relevant.

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