LESSONS FROM LEADERS OF TODAY FOR LEADERS OF TOMORROW

Clarine M. Jacobs, PhD, DBA

Assistant Professor and assists in quality assurance for the College of Management at Park University. She is passionate about teaching, researching, and consulting – always striving to inspire others. Her fascination with leadership and followership was sparked at an early age and continues to thrive with the ever-evolving emerging trends in the field.

The research reported in this article is dedicated to the Michie P. Slaughter family.

"Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple and it is also that difficult." – Warren Bennis
"Today a reader, tomorrow a leader." – Margaret Fuller

ABSTRACT

Emergent lessons learned and experienced can be harnessed to develop the next generation of effective leaders. Leadership requires both experience and continuous development to flourish. As learners of leadership, empirical growth can be found by developing knowledge and reflecting on the experiences of successful leaders. The goal of this exploration was to provide insights that can help students succeed with their leadership challenges and leadership dreams. Moving beyond the classroom learning, this research wanted to question the conventional wisdom surrounding leadership and take the teachable moment to reiterate to students that not only can great leadership be found locally, but lessons learned can bridge that gap between abstract concepts explored in the classroom and real-world application. Interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences and personal meanings of leadership lessons learned from leaders in the community. Identified themes and subthemes captured a structural description of the participants lived experiences with leadership and developed an aggregate description to capture the overall essence of the await and how to determine lessons learned.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Leaders, Lessons, Learners, Followers, Skills

INTRODUCTION

Leadership. A simple word without a conclusive definition. In 1974, Stogdill claimed, "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 7). Yet, the mystery of leadership and great leaders has continually gained interest and popularity. Universities want to claim it as a pursuable degree, organizations want to capitalize on it, and people want to be it. For that reason, exploring lessons learned and wisdom from local organizational leaders proved to be a noteworthy pursuit.

A historical debate in leadership studies is whether leaders are born or made. While there are individuals who seem to be born with the leadership "it" factor or natural ability to lead, other individuals are thrown into leadership roles and transform into leaders. What has been found is that leadership requires both experience and continuous development to flourish as effective leaders learn and develop over time (Seijts, 2013).

Throughout the years, researchers and publishers asked leaders in various fields to offer wisdom to readers and interested learners. While lessons learned from well-known champions in leadership throughout the country has been somewhat of a heavily explored topic, there is a need to seek lessons learned from local companies and individuals. The goal of this exploration was to provide insights that can help students succeed with their leadership challenges and leadership dreams. Moving beyond the classroom learning, this research wanted to question the conventional wisdom surrounding leadership and take the teachable moment to reiterate to students that not only can great leadership be found locally, but lessons learned can bridge that gap between abstract concepts explored in the classroom and real-world application. Civic learning and engagement can be the catalyst for leadership development in students. Teachers are entrusted with serving students as mentors and guides, thus exposing learners to diverse perspectives to cultivate new thoughts and ideas and look introspectively at themselves.

It is the hope to plant the seed for the growth of successful leadership and provide the resources and tools to empower those future leaders to flourish in local communities and beyond. It has been found in psychology that wisdom grows from a combination of learning from experience, reflecting mindfully on those experiences, and applying the scientific method to those experiences (Riggio, 2018). Moving beyond a traditional teaching approach, new learning can be acquired by transferring information based on previous learning and reviewing applications of real-world experiences. To function as a leader, one must think like a leader by questioning and learning through lessons experienced. A well-documented precept of educational psychology is that students are most convincingly motivated to learn the information they distinctly perceive a need to know because students can understand the purpose of what they are learning (Prince & Felder, 2006). Furthermore, understanding the purpose of learning promotes active and collaborative learning, and increases student responsibility in their own learning process (Prince & Felder, 2007). As leaders of tomorrow, students crave the knowledge of effective leadership of today as they enter the workforce or reengage the workforce after earning/furthering education for tomorrow. Emergent lessons learned and experienced can be harnessed to develop the next generation of effective leaders.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lessons learned from leaders inside and outside of the workplace. The exploration was based on the perceptions of leaders

through lived experiences.

Significance of the Study

Leadership is a complex phenomenon. As Bennis (2010) revealed there is a blurred line between leaders and those they lead. Both leaders and followers play active roles in the complex relationship, process, and role of leadership. New graduates, future or current followers, and leaders of tomorrow can learn valuable lessons from leaders of today. The nature of change in jobs and organizations justifies the need to continually learn, and the importance of leaders who continually learn has highlighted the value of learning-focused leadership. Learning leadership is significant divergence from tradition. "Although organizations spend more than $24 billion annually on leadership development, many leaders who have attended leadership programs struggle to implement what they've learned…because leadership is best learned from experience" (Keating, Heslin, & Ashford, 2017, para. 1). It has been found that leaders in learning mode develop stronger leadership skills than their peers and benefited by adopting a growth mindset, setting challenging learning goals, experimenting with alternative strategies and approaches to problems, and gaining insights from after-action reviews from the results (Keating, Heslin, & Ashford, 2017). These characteristics allow leaders to be more agile in adapting to changing environments and creatively problem solve.

With the continuous disruptive change, transforming into learning organizations and adapting the company culture will become more important as what worked in the past may not be equally effective in the future. Understanding that leadership can be developed from experiences may allow leaders to coach, mentor, and influence the workforce effectively (Gesell, 2010). Learning organizations require an innovative approach to management in which leaders serve as coaches whereby companies are moving away from traditional command-and-control practices and toward something radically different: "a model in which managers give support and guidance rather than instructions, and employees learn how to adapt to constantly changing environments in ways that unleash fresh energy, innovation, and commitment" (Ibarra & Scoular, 2019, p. 112).

Findings from this study may provide increased awareness and improved organizational effectiveness through a deeper understanding of leadership through the lessons learned from leader experiences. Leaders and followers coexist in a working relationship, and these two factors have equivalent dynamics with effective leadership. Experienced leaders can not only impart knowledge but also help others maximize their own performance through skilled coaching (Ibarra & Scoular, 2019). Results from this study exploring leadership lessons can aid in developing leader training for promoting leaders of tomorrow and leadership-followership relationships in the work context. Investigating lessons learned from individual experiences will expand the knowledge base of practice in leadership and contribute to a more fundamental and philosophical understanding, allowing future theoretical and empirical developments to emerge in the study of leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Once

critical lessons are identified, training, education, and development for current or aspiring leaders can be adapted and initiated.

Background

Leadership research has a historical evolution and transformation of theories with differing shifts in focus, spanning more than a century, to elucidate the concept, practice, and phenomenon of leadership. With the abundance of leadership literature, the focus of this study was to identify lessons learned through experiences of leadership to determine if local leaders found comparable results as established global leadership research. Findings of well-established global leadership research gathered from 28,000 leaders and human resource professionals revealed key lessons learned about leadership. Highlighted lessons from Caprino (2018) included the following: Leadership development should ensue early in careers because "organizations that extend development of high-potential talent below senior levels are 4.2 times more likely to financially outperform those that don't" (Caprino, 2018, p. 3).

Leaders prefer a personalized experience where there is an encouragement to learn from internal and external mentors and their fellow leaders instead of relying on a "do it yourself" approach. Following five decades of mentoring relationship research, it has been found that mentoring provides benefits such as increased advancement, salaries, organizational commitment, relational skills, identity, satisfaction, physical health and self-esteem, and work-life integration (Johnson, Smith, & Haythornthwaite, 2020, para. 1). In addition, organizations with a formal mentoring culture have reported 20% lower turnover, 46% higher leader quality, greater financial success, and the ability to share information among generations in the workforce (Caprino, 2018).

Additional research from Riggio (2018) revealed the following six leadership lessons learned from experience: 1) Be authentic; 2) Communicate, communicate, communicate; 3) Don't be stingy with praise; 4) The one-hour rule (typical meetings should last no longer than an hour); 5) Be patient, but not too patient; and 6) Be kind, but not too kind (Riggio, 2018). Similarly, seven critical lessons learned by an entrepreneur, leader, and CEO included: 1) Everyone can help you learn something; 2) Managers and leaders are different; 3) Leadership is hard; 4) Self-awareness is essential; 5) Get feedback from your network; 6) Communicate; and 7) be present (Fauerbach, 2021).

Still more leadership lessons learned, of which leaders say they wish they had learned earlier, included: There is no work/life balance. "Think of the work and life domains as existing along a spectrum where one day requires more effort at work and another demands more attention at home" (Boss, 2018, para. 4). Making the right decision vs. making the safe decision. "Leadership is about having the courage to make unpopular decisions because they're the right decisions" (Boss, 2018, para. 5). Emotions are not scary. "Emotions are uncomfortable topics for weak leaders…Think of it this way - Leadership

takes courage" (Boss, 2018, para. 6). Behind every complaint is an unexplored question. "Even a seemingly benign remark by an employee provides insight into that employee's world. Instead of ignoring it, ask the employee to help you understand his or her thinking behind it. Otherwise, the same problem will persist or worsen" (Boss, 2018, para. 7).

Alongside the stress of working through the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on employees have proven to be widespread and substantial. The uncertainty of the turbulent time and constant flux have challenged leaders of all kinds. The following nine lessons learned may help foster supportive work cultures for the unprecedented and uncertain future: 1) Prepare for and adapt to increased turbulence; 2) Reorient your road map with sensemaking; 3) Put care at the center of leadership; 4) Unleash the collective genius of your team; 5) Foster a culture that enables employees; 6) Build shared understanding through dialogue; 7) Emphasize work-life balance for your teams; 8) Give special attention and care to work relationships; and 9) Build restorative habits into your routine (MacDonald, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Design
This study used a phenomenological, qualitative research design with an open-ended question interview for qualitative thematic analysis to explore the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was found that two to ten participants are recommended for the phenomenological method in human science and are enough to reach saturation (Boyd, 2001; Englander, 2012). The phenomenological research process arises by acknowledging a demand or need to understand a phenomenon from the lived experience point of view to discover the meaning of it (Englander, 2012). Phenomenology is a compilation and exploration of people's perceptions related to a specific phenomenon, including the lived experience, how people recount a phenomenon, how people understand a phenomenon, and the meaning people contribute to a phenomenon (Heidegger & Krell, 2008; Welton, 1999). Each participant contributed their personal understanding of the phenomenon under study and was willing to relate personal reflections to the lived experiences with leadership (Englander, 2012). Open-ended questions were designed to gather rich, thick, detailed descriptions of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994) of leaders. Participants had the opportunity to express their points of view and explain lessons learned through individual experiences.

Participants
A purposive sample (local leaders) was invited to participate through personal invitations or recommendations by colleagues or other professionals in the greater Kansas City area (Kansas and Missouri) to gain insights into a phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). The geographic area provides a rich source of public and private organizations with

employees who have diverse backgrounds and varying experiences with leadership. Participants were directed to schedule a short interview (conducted via phone or email) to discuss the consent form and the purpose of the study. Following the initial communication, data collection took place in the form of semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of the participants using open-ended questions in line with phenomenological inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Demographic data were collected for each participant during the interviews, including gender, marital status, age, years of organizational experience, position title, level of education, and field of employment. Three of the six participants were males and three were females. Four of the participants were married and two were single. The ages of participants ranged from 41 to 59 years of age (mean = 49). Years of organizational experience varied from 7 to 34 years (mean = 25). Three of the participants earned a bachelor's degree, one earned a master's degree, one earned a master's degree and is completing a doctoral degree, and one earned a doctoral degree. The fields of employment included the following: Information Security, Technology, Marketing, Healthcare Technology, Dentistry, Military, Non-profit, and Elected Official.

Instrument and Analyses

The interview guide was reviewed before the implementation of this study using an expert panel of an experienced business consultant and member of an Institutional Review Board committee member to confirm the suitability and appropriateness of the interview protocol (Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011). Participant responses were transcribed, examined, and analyzed to develop themes relating to the lived experiences in the context of the workplace to explore leaders' perceptions of leadership lessons learned inside and outside of the workplace. Semi-structured interviews, the most common method of data generation in phenomenology (Reiter et al., 2011), provided an unrestricted exploration of the experiences. Interviews were conducted over a 16-week period from December 2019 to March 2020. Participant experiences and the meanings ascribed to them were reviewed in this phenomenological research study by placing the participants as the experiencers, or experts, and the researcher as the learner (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

The interview guide ensured each interview contained open-ended questions to capture full, rich descriptions of each of the participants' lived experiences, address the purpose of the study, and fulfill the research questions. Interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences and personal meanings of leadership lessons learned from leaders in the community. Identified themes captured a structural description of the participants' lived experiences with leadership and developed an aggregate description to capture the overall essence of the "what" and "how" to determine lessons learned.

This research produced data in which the variables were non-numerical in form and structured in terms

of words or open-ended questions. The modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) was used during data analysis, and transcripts were analyzed for the meaning of units, linking various experiences of the participants to a typical experience (Reiter et al., 2011). Repeated themes, commonalities, keywords, phrases, and statements were sought and analyzed (Moustakas, 1994). Quotations from the participants were used to provide supporting evidence of the experiences. Insights and themes were synthesized into descriptive statements to capture the reflections of the study and derive meanings and essences based on the experiences of the followers to understand better and interpret the phenomena.

Findings

The following paragraphs summarize the findings of the present study, organized by research question, and emphasize participants' professional experiences through their own voices. Themes and subthemes are also reported.

Q1. To what or whom do you attribute your leadership success?

Each participant was able to identify that their environment and upbringing influenced their leadership endeavors. Among the most discussed commonalities explained by the participants included leadership training and leaders experienced. A common echoed theme among the participants included that there was not just one transformative life experience that made them the leader they are today, but a combination of upbringing, environment, training, and experience. Participant one reported a true "passion to help others achieve great things" inspired them to want to be a leader.

Environment. Environment was described by the participants as their upbringing and opportunities that arose to provide leadership opportunities. Participant five reported that an environment that fostered a culture of risk-taking allowed for individual leadership growth. All participants credited both nature and nurture for leadership success. Nurture (e.g., acquired or learned) versus nature (e.g., inherited, or genetic) views that have dominated the scientific literature on expertise development has shown that neither (on its own) is sufficient in explaining successful leaders. As Participant six argued, "Basic leadership skills are to some extent born…You can learn leadership, but the best teacher is experience, making mistakes and learning from them."

Leadership Training. Leadership training was described as an influence on leadership success - opportunities and learning allowed for experiences that fostered an environment to adapt and emerge as leaders. Even though the importance of effective leadership training is widely recognized among business executives, there is not one specific leadership training that is effective for all types of leaders. Participant three attributed leadership skills developed by "working in an organization that identified, valued, and lived core leadership attributes and provided opportunities to develop those skills."

Leaders – The Good and the Bad. The participants explained that by experiencing good (effective) and bad (ineffective) leaders, they were able to identify the type of leader they hoped to be. By witnessing leadership in action, provided an opportunity to learn what to do and what not to do as a leader. Participants noted that they were able to identify and communicate what both successful and unsuccessful leaders look like by being around them or partaking in the leadership-followership relationship. Participant one claimed, "I learned the two most valuable lessons you can learn from the experience I had working for other leaders: 1) What I wanted to be, and 2) What I did not want to be as a leader." Participant three noted they were influenced by several leaders, each with different strengths that he looked up to and tried to learn/model his leadership skills. Participant six claimed she differentiated effective and ineffective leadership qualities and then tried to emulate traits found appealing in those perceived effective leaders.

Q2. What values are most important to you as a leader and why?
Each participant was able to identify values most important to them as leaders. Most all of the participant's answers described soft skills.

Soft Skills. Historically there has been an ongoing controversy on the job skills gap. According to a survey of 500 top executives, ninety-two percent of them said there's a job skills gap and nearly half believed the gap was in "soft skills"—communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Many of those top executives also said applicants applying for jobs are not prepared for the workplace (Wastler, 2013). The importance of soft skills in leadership has been well documented. "Meta-analytic studies reviewing 50 years of research suggest that personality traits such as curiosity, extraversion, and emotional stability are twice as important as IQ — the benchmark metric for reasoning capability — when it comes to predicting leadership effectiveness" (Chamorro-Premuzic, Wade, & Jordan, 2018, para. 2).

Participant one identified "Compassion, integrity, humility, and an openness to others' perspectives". Participant two also identified integrity as well as honesty with an "Ability to lead by example, setting the same or higher expectations on myself as others." Participant three highlighted honesty, communication, and problem-solving as important to a leader and further commented on each by stating:

Honesty – say what you will do and do what you say. Set clear expectations and measure performance against those expectations, nothing else.
Deliver value – the contributions your team makes must be measurable, valuable, and meaningful for your stakeholders.

Ability to describe a realizable future state or outcome – create a vision, strategy of where you want

to be and what you expect to be the outcome. Let your employees use their talents to define how you get there. This is true leadership. Employees may follow you because they are told to, but you get much more out of them if you create a shared agreement and desire to reach a future state.

Communication is key. Be open to discussing ideas. Share and recognize organizational and individual accomplishments. Discuss your expectations, encourage others to accept and commit to obtaining those expectations, and help make them successful.

Problem Solving – the best plan will still have expected challenges that need to be overcome. Dealing with those issues and resolving them quickly will keep your organization on track.

Participants four and five credited competence and communication as important values.
Participant six referenced trustworthiness, compassion, and a willingness to help others by "encouraging others to take on leadership roles without being threatened by their success", with confidence and having the "ability to seek help and advice from others and realize it doesn't diminish your capabilities."

All participants noted honesty and integrity as being the values most important to them in followers. Other values included the ability to be coachable, responsible, committed, trust, loyalty, agility, work ethic, and high ethical standards. The three most important skills, behaviors, traits, or characteristics that they seek in followers included: Emotional intelligence, compassion, work ethic, ability to work with others, communication, trust, and commitment to follow-through and be transparent.
Skills, behaviors, traits, or characteristics the participants believed hindered followers or held them back from advancing included: lacking emotional intelligence, compassion, work ethic, honesty, responsibility, communication, and trust. Other hindrances included allowing ego to get in the way, disrespect for others, negative intentions, and intimidation.

Q3. What skills do you believe have been the most beneficial in your leadership endeavors?
The skills believed to be the most beneficial in leadership endeavors included the following: communication, listening, agility, adaptability, honesty, collaboration, empathy, understanding, humility, competence, and compassion. In line with these skills, theorists shifted focus to soft skills and emotional intelligence (EI) to predict leadership effectiveness and success based on the contradictions and inconsistencies in previous research. For example, effective leadership emerges through self-awareness, becoming cognizant of critical subjective experiences in their life, recognizing the driving forces, retorting by rethinking about self, adapting their moves, and restructuring their actions (Akins, Bright, Brunson, & Wortham, 2013). Further research in this area found EI an important measure for distinguishing potentially effective leaders and as a tool for developing effective leadership skills because the relationship between leadership style and EI was positive and

significant (Batool, 2013). Historical research revealed that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership - "effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree of emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1998, p. 94). Although a certain degree of analytical and technical skill is a minimum requirement for success, studies indicate that emotional intelligence may be the key attribute that distinguishes outstanding performers from those who are merely adequate and that truly effective leaders are distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence (Smith, Oosten, & Boyatzis, 2020).

Leaders, of all kinds and hierarchical levels, have utilized various leadership styles that continuously evolve to be effective. Research has found that effective leaders use a mixture of leadership styles in changing environments in various degrees and extents (Avolio, 2011), adjusting their behaviors to the situation, environment, and followers. Leaders must adapt behaviors and strategies to diverse followers and changes to remain competitive, effective, and practical. It has been suggested that influencing and collaborating with others are necessary values or qualities for a sustainable leader to utilize in the process of transitioning from business activity to a targeted focus on sustainability (Lueneburger & Goleman, 2010). Specifically, explicit adjectives for sustainable development and effective leadership included possessing integrity, having the ability to display humility, to learn, empower, adapt, develop, engage, reflect, sustain, and practice (Akins et al., 2013).

Q4. What is most challenging about being a leader? Why?
All participants discussed the challenges of leadership. Most notably reported were conflict and decision-making. Participant one claimed that the most challenging was "Feeling the pressure that you are ultimately accountable for every success, failure, and decision." Also, the challenge of getting a diverse group of personalities to work together for the greater good and personal success. Participant three reported decision-making as challenging by revealing, "You may never have 'all' the information needed to make the best decision. Not deciding is deciding. Good leaders will make decisions, correct as needed, and be accountable for those decisions."

All participants were able to identify the greatest assets to a leader when facing challenges: humility, compassion, desire to see others succeed, commitment to team or cause, competence/talent of leader and team, flexibility, adaptability, ability to listen, and passion. As Participant six stated, "Passion gives you the drive to pursue additional knowledge and skills needed to be successful."

All participants discussed diverse ways of handling challenges. Participant one explained:
I break down things into manageable sized problems and solve one piece at a time. Deal with the issues you can affect and have enough Emotional IQ to let go of the things outside of your control. Seek help from those around you who have different skills and experience to develop creative solutions to difficult challenges.

Participant five reinforced the need to "Learning the balance of seeking needed feedback on changes and the path forward - adapting to the speed at which change needs to be made."

Q5. What type of problem-solving skills do you use in decision making?
All participants discussed the importance of problem-solving skills as a leader because problems are complex and inevitable. Participant one claimed that focusing on the facts (after gathering each person's truth) is important rather than focusing on emotions. He further noted:

Fear of failure does not impede my ability to make a decision. The only growth an individual ever gains is born out of learning from past failures. I seek input from those around me - new perspectives and group input which is better than the solution from one person.

Participant two recognized the need to gather information to produce solutions and weigh the risks vs benefits. Participant three claimed communication and understanding as critical elements to problem-solving and further outlined the following skills:

Identify the root cause, determine viable solutions (time, impact, and ability to execute), decide on a plan, and monitor the effectiveness of resolution. Depending on the outcome, communicate with those affected about severity, updates, and build confidence to resolve the problem. If likely to occur again, discuss proactive and initiative-taking steps to avoid in the future.

Participant four reported a Military decision-making process (Key Inputs/Steps/Key Outputs) and noted that the military provides training for the formal process that is documented. Participant five highlighted two approaches. The first approach is to listen, assess, recommend, seek feedback, and then implement. The second approach is the GROW Model - Goals, Realities, Options, and Way Forward. Participant six claimed "listening is key" and stated that seeking advice from experts and others who have experienced similar situations or relying on established policies has been helpful. This participant further noted that conflicts unaddressed can lead to animosity and addressing the conflict with an honest conversation usually makes all parties feel heard and can diffuse the conflict.

Q6. What is the greatest lesson you have learned about leadership success through experience?
Each of the participants was clearly able to identify the greatest lesson learned about leadership through experience. Among those lessons emerged the themes of having empathy, integrity, communications, and trust. The most discussed lesson was having the ability to learn and be adaptable. Participant one included being open to differences as each person brings different things with them to a job, being humble and kind, and listening with empathy - "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Participant two noted, "You will not always be the favorite or most

popular, but if you lead with integrity, respect, and honesty, the team will continue to support you as the leader." Participant three claimed "Make sure you have clear expectations of what you are being asked to do (role) and keep stakeholders apprised of your progress. Communicate those expectations to the team and ensure teams don't spend too much time on other good, urgent, or noble work that does not align with expectations." Participant four noted being a good listener and having the skills to effectively solve problems. Participant five highlighted that success comes from failures more so than successes. "Failures allow for learning and adapting to improve." Participant six affirmed the ability to be humble and approachable but professional - "Understanding that my personal behavior determines whether or not I am a trusted leader that people have confidence in."

CONCLUSION

Historically, leadership studies can be riddled with paradoxes, inconsistencies, and contradictions because the construct is elusive and contains ambiguity. Recently, more literature is revealing the need for learning organizations and leaders. Training leaders as learners and coaches – critical to forming a learning culture – is a dramatic and essential shift in the digital age. During the extraordinary time in history and an artificial intelligence (AI) age exemplified by precipitous, ambiguous change, leaders are challenged to rethink in innovative, adaptable, and creative ways to be effective. "Qualities such as humility, adaptability, vision, and constant engagement, are likely to play a key role in more-agile types of leadership" (Chamorro-Premuzic, Wade, & Jordan, 2018, para. 3).

With great uncertainty, learning leaders will continually grow in demand because the unprecedented time calls for new ways of leading. The combination of experience and strategic foresight may enable leaders to sense and adapt to change (Scoblic, 2020). In the current world of flux, learning organizations are increasing in popularity and leaders are reinventing themselves as coaches to inspire energy, creativity, and learning in followers. Leadership coaching has become an increasingly popular and acknowledged tool for developing leaders by building on strengths and closing development gaps. Learning is a competitive advantage, and the most effective leaders dedicate time to learn.

Research has consistently found that there are commonalities shown for effective or superior leaders: intellectual ability, with efficient mental ability, perceptual ability, sociability, and reasoning ability were positively correlated to effective leadership (Day & Antonakis, 2012; Northouse, 2010), showing support that leaders have higher intelligence than non-leaders (Germain, 2012; Goleman, 1998). Self-confidence about one's competencies, skills, self-esteem, and self-assurance as well as determination including initiative, persistence, dominance, and drive (Germain & Tejeda, 2009) were also found to be important skills for leaders (Northouse, 2010). Among the strongest empirical support for research in leadership includes five exemplary leadership practices and behaviors to lead organizations successfully: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart to exemplify effective leadership practices (Baker et al., 2011; Kouzes

& Posner, 2007).

The findings in this research study are consistent with previous research that found the following adjectives used to describe traits linked to effective leaders: charisma, adaptability to situations, attention to the social environment, motivated and achievement-oriented, assertive, cooperative, decisive, dependable, dominant with a desire to influence others, energetic, persistent, self-confident, tolerant of stress, responsible, driven, desire leadership, honest, possess integrity, self-confident, intelligent, knowledgeable, and extroverted (Bateman, 2011; House, 1971; Kest, 2006; Stogdill, 1974; Weber, 1947). Alsom, the following adjectives were used to describe skills associated with effective leaders: problem-solving ability, creativity, diplomatic and tactful, fluent in speaking, knowledgeable, organized, persuasive, conceptually skilled, and socially skilled (Germain, 2012; Stogdill, 1974). Ashkenas and Manville (2018) claimed that aspiring leaders should not just learn and train in leadership, but the best way to develop proficiency in leadership is through authentic experience and continual practice. Six essential skills every leader should practice included the following: building a unifying vision, developing strategy, getting the right people hired and motivated, focusing on measurable results, fostering innovation, and leading themselves.

Both leaders and followers play an active role in the leadership-followership relationship and in achieving organizational results. Through experience, the learning leaders from this research were able to consistently achieve results by earning the trust, respect, and loyalty of the followers by being transparent, employing and adapting an effective leadership approach, and building collaborative relationships that do not dismiss the views of the followers but embraced them. Even though the nature and functions of skillful followers are less understood than skillful leaders, it has been found that the characteristics of effective and exemplary followership are like those of exemplary leadership (Thorough good et al., 2011) thereby suggesting a role adoption overlap between leaders and followers (Bennis, 2010; Colbry et al., 2014; Peus et al., 2012; Whitlock, 2013). A contagious enthusiasm for learning is the heart of learning leadership, where the leader encourages learning achievements as the top priority of the organization to collaboratively share ideas and creativity with followers needed in the digital, technological, artificial intelligence (AI) age.

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