THE POWER OF WORDS:

UNCOVERING TRENDS IN LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS, RESEARCH AND INTEREST (PART I: ACADEMICS)

"No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world."
– John Keating, "Dead Poet's Society"

Leadership continues to be one of the most popular topics in business and has been heavily researched in the organizational sciences.[1, 2] The critical role of leaders cannot be understated: Excellent leaders can inspire, motivate, influence and establish structure for followers,[3] whereas terrible leaders can demotivate, stagnate or "derail" their organizations.[4] However, our understanding of leadership is very fragmented. As one practitioner noted, leadership is "a strange mixture of alchemy, romantic idealism, and reason" — this lack of unity demands that we consolidate what we know about leadership so that we can answer the pressing leadership questions of our era (such as how can leaders adapt best to changing situations, or how leaders enact change through their social networks).[5] From this consolidation, we may face these questions as a unified science and practice, catalyze new perspectives and uncover new questions that are begging to be answered.
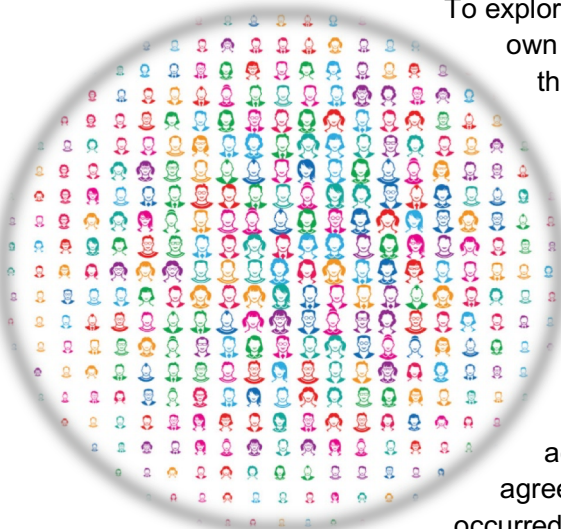
Moreover, reconciling what we know about leadership is interesting in-and-of-itself—each of us may have our own ideas for "what leadership means", "what we have learned about leadership" and "why leadership is so appealing". However, if we want to become better leaders and best equip tomorrow's leaders, it is imperative that we have a shared understanding of what leadership *is* and *is not,* as well as what "best practices" are actually supported by data and research (you may think twice about what is recommended in that leadership book you picked up from the airport). One way that we can begin to consolidate the sheer number of leadership perceptions, research and interests among academics and practitioners is simple: we can ask them! The language we use to describe leadership can be an incredibly powerful tool — with a number of benefits that can help uncover underlying themes and perspectives.[6] As the first part in a series of leading translations on the power of words, we consider academics' and researchers' perspectives on leadership as a concept, topic of research and area which continues to attract a large amount of interest. The second part in the series will focus on managers' and practitioners' perspectives on leadership, with the third part critically consolidating these perspectives to identify areas of agreement and divergence, along with opportunities for collaboration.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research team, consisting of Dr. Timothy Judge, Dr. David Glerum and Shu-Tsen Kuo of the Fisher Leadership Initiative at The Ohio State University, which is dedicated to meeting the world's need for principled leaders, along with a number of members of the International Leadership Consortium (ILC), took a qualitative, content analysis approach to:

1.) Determine common themes and areas of consensus and dissensus on leadership perspectives

2.) Develop a set of findings and facts from a community of leadership academics and researchers

3.) Inform the development of a future survey to solicit leadership perspectives from managers and practitioners


To explore these ideas, leadership researchers were asked, in their own words, to a) define leadership, b) outline the best studies that they are aware of on leadership, c) identify the greatest leadership findings over the past 100 years and d) describe why they believe leadership is receiving so much university attention. A total of 127 leadership researchers (74.8% of which were academics) from around the world participated, representing 75 unique academic institutions. Of these respondents, 41.73% were contacted to participate from ILC members' extended networks. Following rigorous qualitative and content analysis procedures,[7, 8] the research team coded the academics' responses into different themes (with 97.45% agreement) as well as counted the number of times certain words occurred across all of the academics' responses.

CROWDSOURCING A DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

We coded 160 separate definitions of leadership, which we coded for level of analysis (i.e., is leadership focused on an individual leader or follower, their dyadic interaction or envisioned at a group/organization level?) and form (i.e., Is leadership an ability? A skill? A behavior? A procedure? A role?, etc.). We found that only 33.13% of respondents actually specified a level of analysis. Of those who did, 26% described leadership as an individual-level phenomenon. The majority of respondents also identified leadership as a procedure or process (52.5%), although lesser numbers did characterize leadership as a behavior (20.9%) or an ability/skill (18.9%). We also diagrammed the definitions provided by the researchers, separating each component into action-oriented words, targets, objects and objectives. In doing so, we were able to "crowdsource" a definition of leadership, which we believe may help unify leadership research and practice: "Leadership is a process or procedure in which an individual influences others to accomplish a goal or goals."
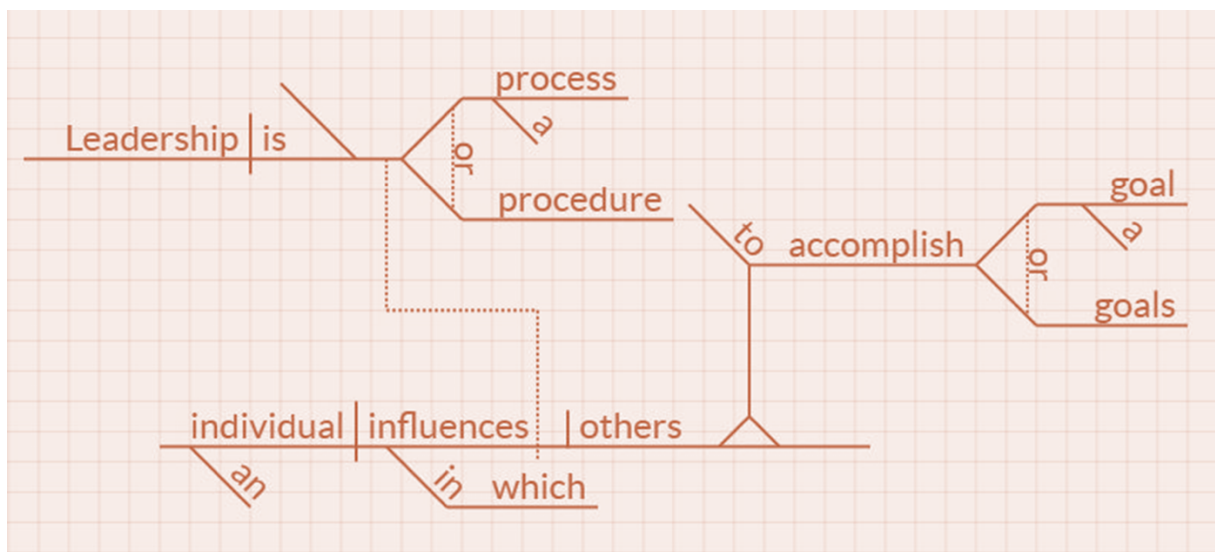

Figure 1. A "Crowd-Sourced" Definition of Leadership

WHAT MAKES LEADERSHIP SO ATTRACTIVE TO UNIVERSITIES?

Academics and researchers were also asked why they think there has been so much university interest in leadership centers/institutes in the past decade. We coded 259 different reasons for why leadership is so attractive to universities. As can be seen in Figure 2, we found that there were five primary reasons for these trends: a) to meet university fundraising goals, b) the societal and community importance of leadership, c) the inherent popularity and attractiveness of leadership, d) to meet leadership education, training and development needs and e) because leadership is universal and opens more opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. We also found that "financial" (e.g., donations, financial, funding, gifts, money, etc.) and "training" (e.g., education, development, learning, training, skills, etc.) language was frequently used by the respondents, suggesting that these respondants also used language to suggest that these factors are important to universities. Societal importance (e.g., change, collective, community, society, support, etc.) and popularity (e.g., attention, attractive, buzzword, interest, popular, sexy, etc.) language was also used, but to a much lesser extent.
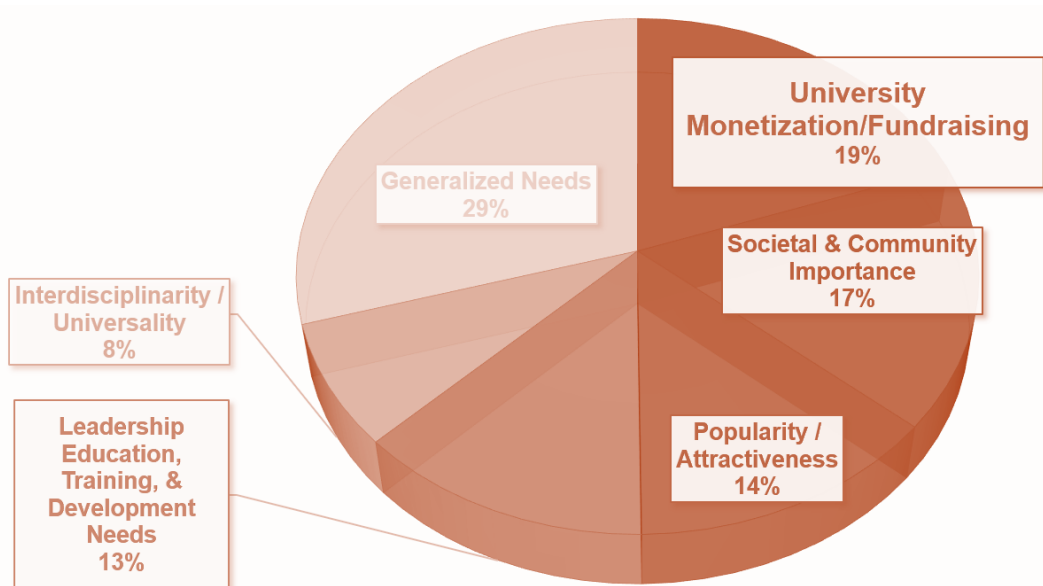

Figure 2. The Top 5 Reasons Researchers Cite for University Interest in Leadership

THE BEST STUDIES AND GREATEST FINDINGS IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

The academics and researchers were also asked to identify the best studies in leadership they have ever read, along with what they consider to be the greatest findings in the 100 years of leadership research.

THE BEST STUDIES IN LEADERSHIP**.** From the 211 responses, we were able to identify 165 specific studies. Of the studies identified, the vast majority were intended for academic audiences (91.1%), published in academic journals (87.9%), and tended to be primary empirical studies (49.7%). These studies were published between the 1960s and present, although most of the identified studies were published between 2000 and 2009. These studies tended to be cited very frequently (Google Scholar modal citations: 3,037, Web of Science modal citations: 878), although theoretical studies tended to be cited more often, after controlling for publication year. Over half of the most frequently mentioned studies focused on the topic of personality and leadership, although other topics included charismatic leadership, leader behavior, and the "romance" of leadership. Interestingly, there was a lot of variability in the studies that were nominated: 104 of them were unique, and only 26 were nominated more than once! Regardless, the most frequently listed *reasons* for why each study was nominated suggests that the three most important descriptors of these studies were rigor, timeliness and importance.

THE GREATEST FINDINGS IN LEADERSHIP. There were 615 total findings generated by the academic and researcher respondents. These findings were categorized by whether they a) introduced or elaborated leadership theory, b) studied outcomes of leadership, c) studied antecedents of leadership, d) examined boundary conditions of leadership or e) concerned cognitive and perceptual aspects of leadership (see Figure 3). Interestingly, like the answer to the "best studies" question, there was a great deal of variability in the nominated findings. The most frequently cited findings, for example, concerned leader behavior, situations and contexts affecting leadership, full range leadership theory (e.g., transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership), leader personality, and leader-follower relationships.
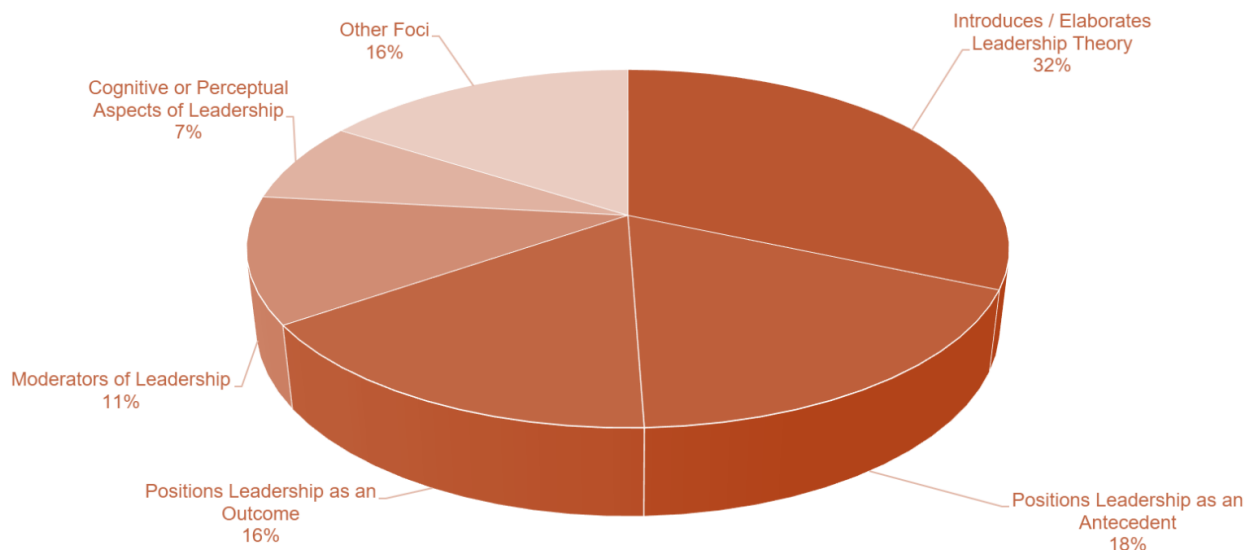
Figure 3. The 5 Functions of the Greatest Findings in Leadership

CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, & QUESTIONS RAISED

The results from the first part of this study were very revealing, concerning academic and practitioner perspectives of leadership theory, interests and research. Notably, the definition of leadership tended to be fairly consistent across academics and researchers, despite some variability. It will be interesting to see just how different this definition is from that which is used by academics, researchers and practitioners. The definition we crowdsourced appears to align heavily with "influence" perspectives of leadership. At the same time, we acknowledge how there can be other components to leadership—they are not necessarily mutually exclusive (although leadership is primarily an influence attempt, traits, skills/abilities, behaviors, etc., are still extremely important).

Despite some similarities in academic conceptualizations of leadership, the nominated research and findings were extremely varied. Although there was not much agreement on the best studies or greatest findings, it is clear that they are, indeed, impactful and influential (e.g., highly cited). Furthermore, the best studies tended to be empirical articles on a broad number of topics, the most cited studies tended to be theoretical articles, and the greatest findings tended to elaborate leadership theory. Beyond this, our future research will seek to elaborate which patterns of studies and findings tend to appear most frequently. For example, do studies and findings that support gender differences in the effects of leadership behaviors appear frequently?

By understanding academic perspectives on leadership theory, research and interest, we now have a better idea for what has been studied, why there tends to be interest in leadership-related topics and whether there is unity in our understanding of leadership as a concept. Analysis of the language that academics and researchers used demonstrated its utility as a powerful tool for meeting our objectives. Indeed, in future phases of this study, we will seek to develop a lexicon of leadership terms that future practitioners and researchers can use in their organizations. In comparing our results with those from the forthcoming practitioner survey, we hope to improve our understanding of how managers and practitioners view leadership theory, research and interest in leadership.

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