

The National Leadership Education Research Agenda: Strategic Priorities and Deepened Perspectives

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Abstract

The inaugural National Leadership Education Research Agenda was created to establish a foundation for scholarship that will guide the field of Leadership Education and develop it as a discipline. Its timely research priorities present a framework for scholarship and resulting applied and basic implications. This paper provides perspective about the agenda's conceptualization, development, and application. It establishes perspective for the applied nature of the agenda and transdisciplinary scholarship that can lead to powerful implications for the field of Leadership Education and the constituents it serves. Further, it explores the agenda's priorities and how the resulting collaborative dialogue can advance the fields of Leadership and Leadership Education globally.

Introduction

What we do today provides a foundation for what we will reap tomorrow. This idea establishes the underpinnings for the use of the National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA) as an applied and focused set of priorities that will form future practice and the development of the next generation of leaders. The language choice of "applied and focused" is intentional because it implies the strategic direction, which shapes the scholarship that creates tangible and theoretical implications for the discipline of Leadership Education. However this is not to assert the preference of applied research over basic research. The NLERA prioritizes both the applied and basic nature of research. As the dynamic issues that leaders face become increasing complex, research questions must aim to address them in both applied and basic terms. While applied research examines a specific set of circumstances, and has the ultimate goal of providing results with implications for real world application (Stanovich, 2007), it is also critical to have basic research which establishes the theoretical foundation for the practice. The agenda's aim and the implications that stem from it are grounded in Stanovich's perspectives:

It is probably a mistake to view the basic-versus-applied distinction solely in terms of whether a study has practical applications. Applied findings are of use immediately. However, there is nothing so practical as a general and accurate theory grounded in basic research (2007, p.107).

Substantiated in the idea of basic and applied research that could contribute to the development of the field of Leadership Education and the learners that it serves, the NLERA development process was initiated in the Fall of 2011 and culminated with its announcement at the 2013 Association of Leadership Educators Conference in New Orleans, LA. Being the first of its kind for the discipline of Leadership Education, practitioners and academics were faced with the daunting challenge of taking the document and making it useful to the work they do with their learners. However, practitioners and academics will not find implications for practice within the NLERA. They will find a document that initiates collaborative dialogue, breaks down interdisciplinary silos, and creates trajectory for the work that we do as leadership educators (Andenoro, Allen, Haber-Curran, Jenkins, Sowcik, Dugan, & Osteen, 2013).

Ultimately, the power of the document lies in the idea of teaching a man to fish versus providing him with fish. Academics that align their scholarship with the priorities can expect to maintain timeliness and relevance in the field and have the potential to create powerful implications for the development of future leaders.

The following presents a snapshot of the agenda's development and provides suggestions for the application of its research priorities. This forms the foundation for the development of Leadership Education programs and scholarship that will epistemologically drive Leadership Education as a discipline.

Gaining Perspective

The charge facing the Leadership Team (Andenoro, et al. 2013, p. 42) responsible for the development of the inaugural NLERA was twofold (2013, p.2): *1) Provide research priorities that can guide applied scholarship contributing to the development of future leaders and managers through higher education, and 2) Provide key elements that further define Leadership Education as a discipline.* However, to address these goals in a meaningful way, it was critical to solicit a bevy of perspectives that assisted in shaping the historical context for the field of Leadership Education. These perspectives came in two main formats. First, personal interviews were conducted with key players engaged in past discipline-based conversations, interdisciplinary workshops, conference sessions, and national workgroups aimed at understanding the field of Leadership Education. Second, a content analysis of historical documents and transcripts relating to the development of perspectives regarding Leadership Education as a discipline was conducted. Emergent themes stemming from a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the perspectives provided a snapshot of the context creating direction for the development of the agenda.

Understanding the general themes associated with the past, it was critical to explore the directions of the future. The recommendations for future research sections were gathered from all of the articles published from 2010-2012 in five journals that inform the field of Leadership Education. Those journals were the *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of*

Leadership & Organizational Studies, Journal of Leadership Education, Journal of Leadership Studies, and Leadership Quarterly. Again, a constant comparative analysis allowed for themes to emerge creating perspective of the research trajectory for Leadership Education.

The previously listed themes were presented to the NLERA Leadership Team, setting a foundation for the development of the document. The Leadership Team invested considerable time into understanding the emergent themes, why they were critical to the development of the field, and how they could be presented in an applied fashion. Through collaborative dialogue and substantial examination and revision, the preliminary document was created. Preeminent scholars in Leadership Education then vetted this document and suggestions were made accordingly. The resulting document serves as a guiding vision for Leadership Education scholarship and assists in further defining Leadership Education as a discipline.

Strategic Application

Mackay wrote that ideas without action are worthless (2005). However, it is also critical to have perspective and supporting data for ideas and resulting actions. Well-outlined and methodologically sound applied and basic research can shape the field of Leadership Education. However, without a critical eye for the direction that research takes, implications can fail to impact the development of the given field (Wiggins, 1998). The NLERA provides direction for the scholarship that will lead to enhanced credibility for the work of Leadership Educators. With respect to this, seven priorities have been adopted to guide the applied and basic research that informs Leadership Education practice. These priorities also create interdisciplinary and collaborative opportunities to further define the field of Leadership Education. For the practical purposes of the agenda, Leadership Education can be defined as:

The pedagogical practice of facilitating leadership learning in an effort to build human capacity and is informed by leadership theory and research. It values and is inclusive of both curricular and co-curricular educational contexts (Andenoro, et al. 2013).

The seven priorities have been broken into two overarching areas that are critical for Leadership Education. The first area, *Pedagogical Priorities - The Applied How of Leadership Education*, deals with leadership learning and transfer of learning through innovative Leadership Education. Included within these are the pedagogical and andragogical methods associated with the development of leadership competencies, capacities, and dispositions. Within the first area there are two priorities (2013):

Priority I – Teaching, Learning & Curriculum Development

The applied outcome of priority one reflects practitioners and scholars will require an intentional eye for building connections with other streams of research, a better understanding the process of educating for mastery or expertise, and the desire to explore the role of individual differences and social identity within Leadership Education contexts. The following areas are recommended

for exploration with respect to Leadership Education teaching, learning and curriculum development.

- *Develop Transdisciplinary Perspectives for Leadership*
- *Explore the Capacity & Competency Development Process for the Leadership Education Learner*
- *Explore the Role of the Individual Learner in Leadership Education*
- *Explore Curriculum Development Frameworks to Enhance the Leadership Education Transfer of Learning*

Priority II – Program Assessment & Evaluation

The applied outcome of priority two reflects that leadership educators and program administrators will be required to have greater intentionality with respect to their understanding of the differences that exist among leadership programs. This includes a better understanding of programmatic assessment processes, their necessity in higher education, and a firmer grasp on the availability, utility, application, and implementation of programmatic assessment resources. The following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to the programmatic assessment and evaluation of Leadership Education.

- *Increase Understanding of Leadership Program Differences*
- *Establish Collaborative Capacity for Programmatic Assessment*
- *Explore Shared Standards for Leadership Programs*
- *Assess Viable Programmatic Assessment Resources*

The second area of the NLERA, *Content Based Priorities – The Applied What and Who of Leadership Education*, reflects the critical importance of considering the content and the learner within the Leadership Education context. Perspective for these areas creates the potential for effective transfer of learning. Thus, it was paramount to establish priorities grounded in the applied the content that guides and the learners that hopefully benefit from Leadership Education. The following research priorities are inclusive of the essential considerations that inform the understanding of the leadership learner and content aimed at developing competencies, capacities, and dispositions for practicing leadership. These priorities are applicable to personal, organizational, community, and global contexts. Within the second area there are five priorities (2013):

Priority III - The Psychological Development of Leaders, Followers, & Learners

The applied outcome of priority three reflects that Leadership Education is critically grounded in the psychological development of those that it is created to impact. The psychological roots of Leadership Education provide a critical foundation for higher-level organizational development and leadership practice. Although this is a foundational element of the Leadership Education landscape, the intricacies of personality and self-awareness, along with other variables, require continued development and additional research that will provide perspective for leadership

educators tasked with preparing the next generation of leaders. The following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to the psychological development of leaders, followers, and learners.

- *Development of Leader, Follower, and Learner Psychological Capacity*
- *Development of Moral and Ethical Foundations for Leadership Practice*
- *Development of Critical and Creative Thinking Disposition and the Accompanying Self-Efficacy to Demonstrate Action*

Priority IV - The Sociological Development of Leaders, Followers, & Learners

The applied outcome of priority four reflects that humans by nature are social beings who seek social interactions to establish pleasure and reduce pain. This fundamental element of the human psyche becomes the foundation for leadership practice. This priority examines the essential function of the individual within the group context and reflects the critical relationship that exists between leaders and followers and instructors and learners with respect to Leadership Education. This priority builds upon the previous priority and establishes a firm application of the individual within the group, team, and organizational contexts. The following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to the sociological development of leaders, followers, and learners.

- *Development of Learning Organizations*
- *Developing the Leader, Follower, and Learner with Respect to Addressing Complex Adaptive Systems*

Priority V – Influences of Social Identity

The applied outcome of priority five reflects that leadership scholars and educators should more effectively center considerations of social identity in leadership research, education, and practice. This includes clear attention to marginalized voices and ideas, an understanding of the socio-historic and contextual influences of organizational environments on leadership development, and the use of action and asset-based approaches to research that situate social identity as a key variable of influence. In an effort to better align Leadership Education with principles of contemporary leadership theories emphasizing inclusion, social justice, and equity, scientific research, the following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to the understanding of learner, leader, and follower social identity.

- *Examining Social Identity in Leadership Content*
- *Examining Social Identity in Leadership Pedagogy*
- *Examining Social Identity in Leadership Research*

Priority VI – Social Change & Community Development

The applied outcome of priority six reflects that Leadership Educators are charged with preparing future leaders to positively impact national and international communities. This

priority is intimately linked to that effort with respect to the dynamic variability and systemic complexity of community development. In an effort to promote healthy and sustainable social change within the communities future leaders are called to serve, it is critically important to address the historical foundations and the interdisciplinary application of diverse theoretical perspectives. This includes but is not limited to the theoretical foundations specifically aimed at social change and the development of vibrant and resilient communities. The following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to social change and community development.

- *Examine Innovative Implications for and Application of Social Change Leadership*
- *Contextualization of Self & The Other*
- *Development of Vibrant & Resilient Communities*

Priority VII – Global & Intercultural Leadership

The applied outcome of priority six reflects that global competence is increasingly a priority within higher education, and the development of global leadership knowledge and capacities are vital for the future of the global community. This priority encompasses a focused charge for the development of global and intercultural competence and increased understanding of leadership in a global context. Indelibly linked to the previous priority global and intercultural leadership promotes and advances social change in an international contexts, with respect to systems-based and complexity-based leadership frameworks. The following areas are recommended for exploration with respect to the development of global and intercultural competencies and capacities within leaders, followers, and learners.

- *The Development of the Intercultural Learner, Leader, and Follower*
- *The Development of Global Organizations*
- *The Development of the Intercultural Leadership Educator*

Transdisciplinary Nature

The term interdisciplinary implies that knowledge often extends beyond or between various disciplines within higher education settings (Ausburg, 2006; Rowland, 2002; Abbot, 2001). With respect to this, the interdisciplinarity of Leadership Education has been a hotly contested conversation on many university and college campuses. Leadership Education can be found in countless departments and programs within higher education settings, which has the potential to lead to territoriality and curricular redundancy. The NLERA was created to reduce territorial silos and enhance interdisciplinary collaborative efforts that advance the field and promote enhanced opportunities for Leadership Education learners. Ultimately, the collaboration promoted by the agenda shifts Leadership Education from interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity, or a synthesis of interdisciplinary efforts (Max-Neff, 2005; Nicolescu, 1999). This synthesis has the potential to create holistic perspective and bring various disciplines together in a coherent whole. The transdisciplinary nature of this effort fuels the future of

Leadership Education and promotes the emergence of new knowledge. This knowledge will be critical as educators attempt to create a foundation for addressing the global complex adaptive challenges of the future.

Conclusion

Leadership Educators are faced with the daunting task of creating the perfect leadership program to meet the needs of diverse learners, stakeholders, academics, and administrators. The difficulty of this task is further exacerbated by the complex nature of Leadership Education and its charge to create a foundation for successfully working with dynamic organizations and diverse people within countless contexts globally. However the NLERA reframes this challenge. Leadership Educators need to abandon the antiquated idea of the perfect program. As Gladwell (2007) eloquently articulates, there is no perfect solution for the masses. There are only perfect options for each of the individuals within the population. This means that form clearly does follow function with respect to the development of Leadership Education, but also identifies that the function must be critically grounded in a process that supports its credibility. This is the purpose of the NLERA.

The NLERA is not only a document. It is a call to action grounded in credibility and linked to a process that can transform how Leadership Educators practice and how Leadership Education learners learn. The process of addressing the priorities through methodologically sound research leads us to new knowledge that creates a forum for collaborative dialogue. Through this collaborative dialogue, transdisciplinarity and advancement of the coherent whole (the field of Leadership Education) is possible. However, this opportunity for application pales in comparison to the potential implications provided by the NLERA. True application of the NLERA generates the possibility for the development of curriculum and practice that forms the underpinnings for addressing complex adaptive issues at the global level.

While the NLERA is intentionally defined as a “national” effort primarily encompassing perspectives from the United States with potential extension to other areas of North America, it has tremendous implications for Leadership Educators working with global learners and in global contexts. The agenda’s process and suggested priorities provide opportunities to create effective Leadership Education programs and learning experiences. Consider that the first two NLERA priorities identify specific opportunities for programs to understand their own self-awareness and identity, and shape perspectives for how to best serve learners through their curricular and co-curricular efforts. Concurrently, the second set of NLERA priorities provide the content that guides the development of learning experiences within the program or workshop. By addressing individual programs through the NLERA research priorities, Leadership Educators develop the whole of Leadership Education. This whole can have application to global contexts through collaborative dialogue. Ultimately, the NLERA is more than a foundation quality Leadership Education. It is a foundation for the leadership that will positively impact the world.

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