THE STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY OF LEADERSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

by

Andrew McBride

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Approved by:

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Dr. Janaki Gooty

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Dr. George C. Banks

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Dr. Jill Yavorsky

____
Dr. Heather C. Vough

ABSTRACT

ANDREW MCBRIDE. The Strategic Ambiguity of Leadership: Implications for the Science and Practice of Leadership Development. (Under the direction of DR. JANAKI GOOTY)

Leadership is a conceptually ambiguous term, which creates a challenge for the practice of leadership development: How do we develop something without knowing what that "something" means? Prior research has not explored this challenge, and its existence has not stopped organizations from spending billions of dollars a year on leadership development. In this dissertation, I start by asking how individual leadership development programs can function in light of leadership's ambiguity. I use qualitative theory-building methods in study 1 to generate an explanation for this question that is grounded in the concept of strategic ambiguity. In study 2, I followed up on one of the key implications of this explanation—potential competing incentives between science and practice—and asked how the science and practice of leadership development (mis)aligns. For this study, I used inductive coding on two sources: academic recommendations drawn from leadership development and leader behavior articles, and practitioner claims drawn from client/customer-facing websites. In my overall discussion, I develop implications for the science and practice of leadership and its development.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is hard to overstate the ubiquity of the word "leadership" in our society. It is invoked regularly in the news, whether the context is politics, business, or sports. References are frequently made to a company's leadership team, their leadership plan, their leadership development, and so on. Across the many invocations of leadership, there are an equally large number of *meanings* attached to the term. Although researchers might prefer to narrow down the concept (Carton, 2022), its "semantic aura" (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021) seems to have only expanded and diversified over time. Researchers have identified the ambiguous nature of leadership since at least 1975 (e.g., Bernardin & Alvares, 1975; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975) and today, most recognize that although the label is shared, leadership can mean "very different things to different actors in different situations" (Collinson & Tourish, 2015: 7-8; see also Alvesson, 2019; Kelly, 2014; Schedlitzki et al., 2018).

Against the backdrop of leadership's ambiguous social meanings, organizations spend billions of dollars a year on leadership development programs (LDPs) and activities (Westfall, 2019). For the organizations that conduct leadership development (LD), ambiguity poses a challenge: How do you develop something without an agreed upon definition of what that "something" is? At a minimum, leadership meanings should matter to organizations that conduct LDPs because the answer will influence their marketing ("we can help your people do X") and their content for participants ("being a leader means X"). The ambiguity of leadership is thus relevant to any organization that creates programs and activities designed to develop it.

Most of the academic research on leadership development has assumed that some level of agreement regarding leadership's meaning exists in programs. The concept of leadership is mostly taken for granted, and research subsequently focuses on how to generate desired outcomes (e.g., a stronger leader identity, a specific learning outcome, higher motivation) (Mabey, 2013). These works are valuable, and the field has progressed because of their theories and results. But what this research does not help us understand is *how* desired outcomes can emerge in the first place. Underlying the many studies that show how LD can generate specific outcomes is a puzzle of how programs function at all when their core concept—leadership—is a site of ambiguous, conflicting, and vague meanings (Alvesson & Blom, 2021; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Hooijberg & Choi, 2000; Kelly, 2014).

The existence of these meanings could derail or harm the process of development in at least two ways. First, people are typically *demotivated* by ambiguous goals (Hamner & Tosi, 1974; Rizzo et al., 1970; Weber & Weber, 2001): If I do not understand what I am trying to develop, why would I exert more effort towards it? Second, when people hold conflicting or contradictory meanings of leadership (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2009; Heilmann et al., 1984; Hooijberg & Choi, 2000; Pulakos et al., 1996; Salam et al., 1997; Semeijn et al., 2014), the potential for conflict between people rises, particularly if those meanings relate to values (e.g., leadership as top-down versus leadership as dispersed). The fact that LDPs are, at least by financial metrics, doing well is itself a puzzle. My dissertation seeks to provide an explanation for that puzzle by asking *how do leadership development programs function given the ambiguous nature of leadership?*

To answer this question, I first conducted an inductive qualitative study at Capacity, an organization that specializes in leadership development. Through interviews and participant observation, I developed a theoretical explanation for how a program can function, not just in spite of, but *because of* the ambiguity of leadership. My findings for study 1 thus suggest that there may be a key tension between the science of leadership—which generally seeks to enhance clarity—and the practice of LD—which may benefit from maintaining ambiguity. I followed up on this implication in study 2 and used Gioia et al.'s (2013) inductive qualitative analysis to identify themes from three sources: 1) recommendations in the practical implications sections of the leadership development literature, 2) recommendations in the practical implications sections of the leader behavior literature, and 3) website advertisements from prominent LD firms. This allowed me to identify (mis)alignment between the science and practice of LD (Banks et al., 2016). Finally, I end by discussing big picture implications and questions for the science and practice of leadership and its development.

My dissertation provides at least three contributions to existing literature. First, I emphasize the importance of leadership's ambiguity—a contextual phenomenon (Johns, 2024)—to the practice of leadership development. LD researchers are beginning to address the ambiguity of leadership (e.g., Leroy et al., 2022; Vongswasdi et al., 2023) but there has been no theory-building on how it might help or hinder LDPs (c.f., no mention of ambiguity in Day & Dragoni, 2015; Wallace et al., 2021). Second, I draw on the concept of strategic ambiguity to propose that, counter to my initial inclinations, ambiguity may not be harmful but rather functional for organizations engaged in LD. This finding stands in contrast to academic perspectives on leadership that emphasize the importance of clarity. I suggest that strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) offers a powerful way to understand why practitioners might be incentivized to do the opposite of what many leadership academics pursue (Leroy et al., 2022). Finally, I contribute to the leadership literature more broadly by explaining how and why the ambiguity of leadership might be maintained. I end by inviting reflection on how leadership's ambiguity might benefit not only practitioners, but also us as leadership researchers.

CHAPTER 2: RELATED WORK

In this chapter I review related work that helped me form my research question for study 1. My central goal was to understand how a leadership development program can function in light of the ambiguity of leadership. At present, organizations are spending billions of dollars trying to develop something that does not have an agreed-upon definition. How do LDPs work in this context? This question is motivated by three related bodies of research.

First, I draw on a disparate stream of conceptual and empirical research that focuses on meanings of leadership. This research is dispersed throughout the broader leadership literature and speaks to the ambiguity of leadership, as well as to how people's conceptualization of leadership depends in part on the roles they occupy in organizations. This collection of research justifies my proposal that leadership is an ambiguous concept in society writ large.

Second, I introduce research on role ambiguity and on power to explain why we might expect LDPs to be negatively affected by leadership's ambiguity. Role ambiguity research suggests that when people do not have a clear sense of what they are supposed to do at work, they experience negative outcomes. Research on power suggests that the meanings we attach to social phenomena (e.g., leadership) are consequential. Different meanings can represent a struggle over who can and cannot make legitimate claims to leadership. Together, these areas of work highlight that the ambiguity of leadership creates the possibility for conflict and thus the disruption of LDPs.

Third, I draw on research on leadership development. Leadership development is the context for my study and the theoretical process of interest. Although the ambiguity of leadership could (and likely does) impact other areas of interest, LDPs are where meanings of leadership are most explicitly deployed. Organizations that offer LDPs have to explain to potential clients what they are offering, which implies what leadership means to them. Further, in programs themselves, LD facilitators have to explain to participants what they should be learning, which implies an answer to what leadership is. Thus, I suggest that leadership development is a particularly important context to highlight the ambiguity of leadership and its potential impacts. After reviewing these areas, I close by reiterating my central research question and summarizing the remaining chapters.

Meanings of Leadership

A core assumption underlying my research question is that leadership is a socially ambiguous concept. The term ambiguous means "capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I adopt this definition and also contrast ambiguity with clarity and precision, where the former refers to being "easily understood" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and the latter refers to being "exactly or sharply defined or stated" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Thus, when I refer to leadership as an ambiguous concept, I mean that it has taken on many different meanings in society and is not easily understood nor clearly defined (see also Alvesson & Blom, 2021). This remains true even if specific organizations, groups, or people *do* define leadership in an unambiguous way. The ambiguity at the level of "discourse" (Phillips & Oswick, 2012) remains even in this scenario.

In this section, I review research that justifies my assumption that leadership is a socially ambiguous concept. Specifically, I review work that shows that both academics and practitioners have yet to converge on a shared understanding of leadership; In contrast, the term continues to be attached to a diverse array of meanings.

After a century of research on the topic and an explosion of practitioner interest, it would be logical to assume that there is some consensus as to what leadership (the process) and leader (the person) means (Kniffin et al., 2019). However, both academics (Alvesson & Blom, 2021; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Leroy et al., 2022) and practitioners (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Harding et al., 2011; Salam et al., 1997; Tourish, 2014) associate leader(ship) with a variety of meanings. These meanings diverge across people (e.g., people disagree; Hooijberg & Choi, 2000; Salam et al., 1997; Tourish, 2014) and within people (e.g., people contradict themselves or their definitions change over time; Harding et al., 2011). Although "meanings of leadership" is not a distinct academic space, a disparate collection of research in the broader leadership literature converges on a simple yet important conclusion: Leader(ship) is an ambiguous concept that people associate with various, potentially contradictory meanings.

Academic meanings of leadership. The leadership literature contains many definitions of its central concept. Although it is impossible for one review to summarize all these definitions, I provide a selection in Table 1 that spans work from different decades, authors, and research orientations (e.g., positivist, interpretive). One common element of these definitions is the concept of influence, which may be the one point of convergence in a sea of variation (Alvesson & Blom, 2021). Researchers with different specialties and paradigms alike have noted the wide range of leadership definitions employed in the literature (e.g., Alvesson & Blom, 2021; Day & Harrison, 2007; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Kort, 2008). Summing up a broad review of leadership definitions, Alvesson and Blom (2021: 7) concluded:

> [Leadership] may mean what top managers do, what all managers do, what managers and leaders do, what those that are not managers but leaders do, what all do (influencing) and what (some) groups do. It may be about influencing, instructing, inspiring, meanings, attitudes, behaviours, results etc. It may be leader-driven, follower-driven, combined, group-based, a style, a relationship, an act, a framework, an espoused belief, a set of

> beliefs enacted, a fantasy, an identity support mechanism or a language game. It may be about having followers, or not having followers, as all are involved in the social leadership process.

Despite the variation, some leadership researchers have attempted to craft general definitions of leadership. For example, Yukl (2013: 66) defined leadership as the process of "influencing and facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". The problem with this definition is that we could replace the word leadership with "management", "culture", "structure", "strategy", or "social identity" (to name a few) and still have a coherent definition (Alvesson, 1996). This highlights the fact that even seemingly precise definitions of leadership are still rather vague and could refer to other concepts.

Like Yukl (2013), Antonakis et al. (2004: 5) offered a concrete definition of leadership that they believed "most leadership scholars would agree [with]":

> the nature of the influencing process – and its resultant outcomes – that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leader's dispositional characteristics and behaviours, follower perceptions and attributions of the leader, and the context in which the influencing process occurs.

Antonakis et al. (2004) may have been right that in principle, many leadership scholars would agree with this definition. However, it would be much more difficult to argue that this agreement is represented in the literature.

For example, some researchers have defined leadership as a shared property of a social system (Day & Harrison, 2007) while others have defined it as an influence process where one person (i.e., the leader) alters the behaviors and attitudes of others (i.e., followers) (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2004; Yukl, 1989). For some, leadership is about managing the meanings of others (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). For others, meaning is not a key concept; leadership is instead defined as influence in the pursuit of a common purpose (Carton, 2022). Still some researchers have argued that leadership encompasses all of these definitions and more (Day & Harrison, 2007). Day (2000: 582), for example, defined leadership processes as "those that generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways". In this case, almost anything social could be brought under the umbrella of leadership. Similarly broad definitions have been offered by other researchers (Alvesson & Blom, 2021). The result is a wide array of academic definitions of leadership; The meanings applied to the concept are broad, varied, and sometimes contradictory (Alvesson & Blom, 2021; Day & Harrison, 2007).

Practitioner meanings of leadership: Conceptual research. Given the range of meanings *academics* apply to leader(ship), we might expect a similar trend among people more broadly. A number of authors have made this argument in conceptual and theory papers. DeRue and Ashford (2010: 630), for example, stated that "leadership is ambiguous, with no clear definition or meaning across people". Collinson and Tourish (2015) argued similarly and suggested that the implications of this lack of shared meaning have not been adequately explored by leadership researchers (see also Tourish, 2014).

Some scholars have argued that leadership has an almost infinite range of meanings, which leads to competing definitions and understandings in practice (Kelly, 2014; Schedlitzki et al. 2018). From this perspective, leadership does not have a fixed meaning, but rather "serves to create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings, and interpretations" (Kelly, 2014: 906). This suggests that leadership researchers should not expect organization members to share meanings of leadership; instead, researchers should explore how these different meanings are deployed and what impacts they have (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Kelly, 2014).

Practitioner meanings of leadership: Empirical research. Many of the conceptual arguments I highlighted in the section above are substantiated by empirical work. However, whereas the conceptual research discusses meanings of leadership, most empirical work focuses on meanings of *good* or *effective* leadership. The key idea remains the same: there is ambiguity and conflict in the meanings people associate with leadership. Yet it is worth noting the misalignment between conceptual and empirical research in this regard.

The empirical work on this topic reaches back decades; As early as 1975, researchers demonstrated that people's conceptions of "good leadership" depended on their role within the organization (Bernardin & Alvares, 1975). Later research coined the term "leadership effectiveness models" to "refer to relationships observers see between performance of leadership roles and effectiveness" (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000: 342). The idea here is that people differ in terms of what they see as good, necessary, or crucial leadership behaviors. Hooijberg and Choi (2000) found that the subordinates of managers, for example, perceived "facilitating group processes" as a highly important component of effective leadership. The managers themselves perceived this as relatively unimportant.

Other research similarly found that managers, subordinates, and superiors do not share an understanding of what makes for good leadership (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2009; Heilmann et al., 1984; Pulakos et al. 1996; Salam et al. 1997; Semeijn et al. 2014). Much of this work used the competing values framework (CVF; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) to conceptualize the multiple roles that leaders might be expected to take on. Empirically, they assessed ratings of leaders from multiple raters (e.g., via 360-degree feedback). Salam et al.'s (1997) findings are particularly interesting because they highlighted that meanings of good leadership can be contradictory as well as varied. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the authors found that leaders who were perceived as “challenging the status quo” and “encouraging subordinates’ independent action” were perceived favorably by subordinates but unfavorably by superiors. In this case, subordinates and superiors’ understandings of leadership, of what it means to be a leader and engage in leadership, were in direct opposition. In turn, this misalignment in meaning reflected the different groups’ interests: subordinates had an interest in their autonomy and involvement in decision-making whereas superiors had an interest in maintaining a clear hierarchy of authority.

As we can see, empirical work on leadership effectiveness models focuses on how different people and groups conceptualize good or effective leadership (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000). These studies do not ask people what they associate with leadership more generally (or neutrally). This may reflect a general preoccupation with the positive in leadership studies (Alvesson, 2020). However, there is reason to believe that people would *not* respond differently if asked about leadership as opposed to good leadership. This is because people tend to associate leadership with good things (Collinson et al., 2018; Kniffin et al., 2019; Leroy et al., 2022). As such, if leadership is considered inherently good, respondents may not differentiate good leadership from leadership. In everyday talk, they may be treated synonymously.

Still, it is worth considering whether we might find more agreement between people if they were asked about the meanings they associate with leadership rather than the meanings they associate with good or effective leadership. Harding et al. (2011) did exactly this, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. They found that:

> everyone shared a difficulty in defining leadership, with a variety of contradictory descriptions used within and between them. For example, while several participants

> defined leadership as based on charisma, others said it had nothing to do with charisma; while some said it was based on organizational values, others thought it was related to individual characteristics (Harding et al., 2011: 932).

Thus, in addition to supporting previous work that showed a great deal of divergence *across* people, Harding et al. (2011) also found contradictions *within* people (e.g., within a statement or a collection of statements). They also showed that this ambiguity in meanings of leadership is not restricted to cases where people are asked about good or effective leadership.

Cause of the ambiguity. Given the conceptual and empirical support for leadership's ambiguity, it makes sense to ask *why* this is the case. Why is it that leadership is so easily associated with almost anything that "seems impactful" (Leroy et al., 2022: 13)? Part of the problem may be that leadership is discussed in highly diverse contexts, from education to the military, from politics to organized crime, and from social activism to business organizations (Alvesson, 1996). When employed across such a range of contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that leadership begins to take on more and broader meanings. More recently, Alvesson (2020) has pointed some of the blame at researchers, whom he claims are too quick to apply the label "leadership" and "leader" to the things managers do in business organizations. Other authors have tracked the history of leadership in business organizations and found that, while the concept was used by some business school academics as early as 1930, society more broadly did not tend to equate leaders/leadership with business organizations until the last few decades (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021). Many business schools in the late 1970's, for instance, employed the terms manager and management; Over time, these terms have been replaced by leaders and leadership (Kniffin et al., 2019). What these findings mean is that leadership is far from a "homegrown" term in management or applied psychology. Rather, it is a borrowed term that has historically been associated with religious and historical figures (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021). These previous contexts are still relevant today, because, as Ford and Harding (2007: 482) argued, “it is impossible…for someone to hear the word ‘leader’ and disassociate it from its earlier meanings”.

Summary. In sum, leadership is far from a clearly defined concept. It is, at the least, ambiguous and capable of taking on multiple meanings. It may even be devoid of any essential meaning, instead acting as an “empty signifier” to which anything can be attached (Kelly, 2014). When asked, people in organizations provide a variety of meanings and interpretations to leadership, which often differ from others. These differences can express and reflect different interests, which creates the potential for conflict.

Role ambiguity and power: Why ambiguity matters

Next, I review two areas of research that provide reason to think the ambiguity of leadership could negatively impact LDPs. Specifically, research on role ambiguity and research on power separately help us understand how the ambiguity of a concept (e.g., leadership) could create negative outcomes for participants and organizations involved in LDPs.

Role ambiguity. Role ambiguity refers to the perception that one’s expectations are “vague and unclear…such that employees are uncertain as to what is expected of them” (Eatough et al. 2011: 620; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Here, I apply this idea to the context of LDPs, such that participants replace employees and expectations are attached, not to a work role, but to learning and developing as a leader (i.e. the stated goal of programs). Although the ambiguity of a *role* is distinct from the ambiguity of a *concept* (e.g., leadership), role ambiguity research is relevant because it shows that people generally dislike situations in which they lack clarity around what they are expected to do. As such, research on role ambiguity provides some indirect evidence to support the notion that the ambiguity of leadership creates a potential challenge for LDPs.

Research on role ambiguity has a fairly long history in management and applied psychology. Because of this, there are multiple meta-analyses that provide cumulative evidence for the hypothesis that role ambiguity relates to negative performance and affective outcomes. In a meta-analysis of 74 studies containing 11,698 participants, Tubre and Collins (2000) found a negative relationship of $\rho = -0.21$ between role ambiguity and job performance. The authors noted that this supports the general prediction that people do poorly in situations where they perceive unclear and vague expectations. Similarly, Eatough et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 42 studies with 5,756 participants revealed a negative relationship of $\rho = -0.15$ between role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behavior.

In terms of affective outcomes, Schmidt et al. (2014) found a relationship of $\rho = 0.28$ between role ambiguity and reports of depression from a meta-analysis of 27 studies that included 13,703 participants. Further, Michel et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 20 studies with 5,344 participants showed a relationship of $\rho = 0.20$ between role ambiguity and reports of work family conflict. As Podsakoff et al. (2007: 438) wrote, "people tend to appraise role conflict and role ambiguity as potentially threatening to their personal growth and goal attainment (Boswell et al., 2004; Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine et al., 2005; LePine et al., 2004)." As a result, role ambiguity tends to generate negative emotions and attitudes. In their own meta-analysis, Podsakoff et al. (2007) categorized role ambiguity as a hindrance stressor, which collectively relate positively to strain ($\rho = 0.50$), turnover intentions ($\rho = 0.30$), turnover ($\rho = 0.13$) and withdrawal behavior ($\rho = 0.13$) and negatively to job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.34$) and commitment ($\rho = -0.31$).

In sum, the conceptual and empirical work on role ambiguity shows that people experience a variety of negative outcomes when faced with standards and expectations that they perceive to be unclear. We could extend this idea to the context of participants in LDPs: Perhaps participants would find it frustrating if they were told to work on their leadership skills but were faced with a program that did not clearly define what those skills are. Further, participants might feel discouraged by unclear expectations about what should change after engaging in an LDP. If participating in a LDP is a role, leadership's conceptual ambiguity could make it difficult for participants to know what they are supposed to do in that role to be successful.

Power. Research on power further substantiates the point that ambiguity can create negative outcomes. Unlike research on role ambiguity, power can be connected more clearly to the idea of ambiguity of *concepts* (e.g., leadership). It tells us that meanings attached to concepts can reflect different values and preferences. As such, those meanings are consequential and can create divisions among people. To make this argument, I draw on a systematic conceptualization of power (Fleming & Spicer, 2014), which states that there are many forces, both human and nonhuman, that converge to influence the actions of people. As Ladkin and Probert (2021: 6) put it, power is "present whenever an individual, or an institution, normalizing dynamic, or historic injunction attempts to affect the actions of another".

One way power operates to affect our actions is through the assignment of labels, definitions, and meanings to particular experiences and social objects (e.g., social phenomena). Together, this constitutes a particular way of representing some aspect of social reality. In other words, it constitutes discourse, "systems of talk and texts that construct social reality in distinctive ways" (Fleming & Spicer, 2014: 245). Discourse on an aspect of social reality represents that aspect in a particular way; it assigns certain meanings to that aspect and thus necessarily excludes others.

In this way, discourse organizes our experience (Goffman, 1974) and provides us with a particular orientation towards the world (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). Discourse provides us with "the legitimate mode of perception" (Bourdieu, 1985: 730) for some aspect of social reality; it provides us with *one way* to experience and perceive the social world. This illustrates the connection between meanings (and the discourse they accrue to) and power. If our perception of the world is in some way shaped by the meanings applied to experience and social objects, then those meanings play an important role in determining how we (think we can) act in the world (Deetz, 1992). The important struggles happen over these meanings, over the ability to "produce and impose the legitimate world view" on others (Bourdieu, 1985: 728).

Applied to leadership, this understanding of power invites us to consider meanings of leadership as consequential (Kelly, 2014). When different people hold different understandings of a concept, there is the potential for disagreement and conflict. A systemic conceptualization of power tells us that the different meanings of leadership *matter*; they implicate who is and is not a leader and what is and is not leadership. Because being a leader and doing leadership are seen as socially desirable (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Kniffin et al., 2019; Learmonth & Morrell, 2021), those implications likely matter to people. The diversity of leadership meanings thus creates the conditions for conflict and struggle between people. An LDP is a context in which this conflict is particularly likely to occur because, unlike in other contexts, people cannot easily avoid a conversation about what leadership means. Given that leadership is the focal concept in an LDP, it may be difficult to avoid or ignore a clash of meanings.

A similar case has been made regarding professional(ism), another ambiguous and desirable concept that has implications for "the production and reproduction of both power and privilege" (Ferguson & Dougherty, 2022: 5). Labeling an action a leadership action or labeling a person a leader imbues the action or person with legitimacy since leadership is equated with good things (Collinson et al., 2018; Meindl et al., 1985) and is often seen as a necessity in business organizations (Newark, 2018). Alternatively, to claim, “that is not leadership”, or “that person is not a leader”, is to try and strip some action or some person of legitimacy.

Clearly, leadership is not *always* associated with good things; the denial of leadership might not always be a denial of legitimacy. This does not detract from the point that struggles over the meaning of leadership are consequential. Leadership is a concept that is ripe for this type of exploration. As argued above, leadership is an ambiguous concept that can easily be associated with a variety of meanings. This means that struggle, rather than consensus, over the meaning of leadership is likely. Given this background, it becomes even more puzzling that LDPs generally seem to function well. If leadership is associated with a variety of meanings, and the struggle over those meanings is consequential to people, then we might expect LDPs to be impacted by that struggle. However, when we turn to the leadership development literature, there is little to no discussion of this possibility.

Leadership development

A particularly important context in which to study meanings of leadership, and the potential conflict they bring, is leadership development. It is in this context that meanings of leadership are deployed explicitly. That is, LDPs necessarily assign certain meanings to leaders and leadership, whether this is done explicitly or implicitly. For a program to claim to be leadership development, it must at some point, and in some ways, express what leadership means. Because of this, LDPs are an ideal context in which to study the impact of leadership’s ambiguity.

Overview of LD literature. The academic literature on LD has not addressed the question of how programs manage the multiple and potentially conflicting meanings that people associate with leadership. This stems in part from the fact that most of the LD literature does not discuss potential divergence in meanings of leadership (Mabey, 2013). The literature is primarily functionalist in orientation (Deetz, 1996; Mabey, 2013), meaning it focuses on achieving given ends (e.g., developing leaders) through the application of mainly deductive and quantitative research. This orientation is illustrated by Day et al.'s (2021: 1) summary of the purpose of LD and research on it:

> Leadership development seeks to understand, predict, and intervene effectively in addressing the questions of how individuals develop as leaders and how collections of individuals develop a capacity for leadership.

Research on LD from the functionalist orientation has spent considerable effort trying to identify factors that predict successful leader(ship) development (e.g., antecedents; Avolio & Hannah, 2008), factors that improve the development process itself (Lacerenza et al., 2017), and outcomes of the development process (Day & Dragoni, 2015). Much of this work focuses on individual leader development; far less has examined what Day (2000) described as leadership development, where the focus is on collective capabilities for leadership (Day et al., 2014). As such, I mainly review work on individual-level leader development here.

Two recent models summarize much of our knowledge on LD, while simultaneously revealing the lack of scholarly attention paid to meanings of leadership. First is Day and Dragoni's (2015: 136) model (see Figure A1), which highlights the "leadership development process and [its] outcomes". I focus on the individual level of this model. Here, LD programs/activities are said to result in proximal developmental indicators such as self-efficacy

(Hannah et al., 2008), a leader identity (Day et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005) and leadership competencies (Kragt & Day, 2020). With practice and experience, these developmental indicators lead to distal indicators such as improved performance (Day et al. 2014).

Do certain development methods yield improved LD outcomes? This is the overarching question for the leadership training literature, which covers the "individual experience/interventions" component of Day and Dragoni's (2015) model. A recent meta-analysis on this topic looked at a range of factors, including the method of delivery (information-based, demonstration-based, practice-based), training duration, training setting, trainee's level of leadership, and more (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Effectiveness was conceptualized in terms of *reactions* (e.g., trainee attitude towards the training), *learning* (e.g., what trainees can do following training), *transfer* (e.g., what the trainee will do following training), and *results* (e.g., meeting organizational objectives). Results suggested that, in general, these interventions are fairly effective (Lacerenza et al., 2017), though different intervention methods yield different results. For example, programs that utilize practice-based methods (e.g., those that offer practice opportunities) appear to impact participant learning more strongly that those using information-based methods (e.g., those that only deliver information; Lacerenza et al., 2017).

Finally, a comparatively smaller body of work considers the possibility that individual differences affect people's degree of success in LDPs. This covers the "individual capabilities" portion of Day and Dragoni's (2015) model. Here, researchers have examined people's ability to develop as a leader and motivation to do so (e.g., Avolio & Hannah, 2008) Motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001: 482), for example, is a construct that is said to capture "individual differences…that affects a leader's or leader-to-be's decisions to assume leadership training, roles, and responsibilities and that affects his or her intensity of effort at leading". The idea here is that certain people are more motivated to pursue and persist at developing their leadership capabilities. This is reflected in practice when organizations identify “high-potential” individuals for LD (Church et al., 2021). According to Church et al.’s (2021) findings, this identification process yields performance gains above and beyond that which would be expected by the developmental process alone. This adds weight to Avolio and Hannah’s (2008) argument that assessing the developmental readiness of would-be-leaders is an important component of LD. Still, Day et al. (2021) warned that there are ethical considerations to this practice that researchers should more thoroughly interrogate. For example, if we adopt particular definitions of high-potential that are grounded in white and masculine norms, the practice of identifying these “high-pos” will perpetuate inequalities, not only in terms of who is leading (e.g., white men), but also in terms of how they are leading (e.g., in line with white, masculine norms) (Eva et al., 2021).

A second model, this one from Wallace et al. (2021) (see Figure A2), largely corroborates Day and Dragoni’s (2015) model while also adding some nuance. Here, the focus is more exclusively on learning outcomes, but the authors do also consider “zero-order” factors that influence subsequent learning (akin to Day and Dragoni’s individual capabilities). Because I am focusing on individual leader development, the outcomes that are collective in nature are less relevant for my purposes.

In Wallace et al.’s (2021) model, there are three different “orders” of learning outcomes. Zero-order outcomes, as mentioned, provide the basis for subsequent learning. They include the ability and motivation to develop leadership. These are included as outcomes, rather than antecedents (as in Day and Dragoni’s model) to illustrate “that they are subsequent to, and influenced by, the learning and development outcomes posited by the rest of the model”

(Wallace et al., 2021: 4). In other words, these zero-order factors can be influenced by higher-order learning factors. Someone's motivation to lead might increase after internalizing a leader identity, for example (Day et al., 2009).

The first-order learning outcomes in Wallace et al.'s (2021) model represent skills and competencies that are said to support leading (Wallace et al., 2021: 6). Examples include intra- and inter-personal competencies (e.g., decision-making and social intelligence, respectively) and general management competencies (e.g., planning, delegating). Wallace et al. (2021) proposed that the acquisition of these first-order learning outcomes spurs the integration of deeper-level learning outcomes. This is similar to Lord and Hall's (2005) argument that the development of surface-level skills spurs deep-level cognitive changes.

In Wallace et al.'s (2021: 8) model, second-order learning outcomes "represent the leadership maturation that results from the integration of first-order learning outcomes…into leadership-related identities, values, and holistic frameworks". These include things like leader identity, defined as the meanings people attach to themselves as leaders (Brown, 2015; Epitropaki et al., 2017). LDPs are expected to draw on, strengthen, and perhaps alter participants' leader identities (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Petriglieri, 2011; Wallace et al., 2021).

Finally, Wallace et al.'s (2021) model includes "direct outcomes" (e.g., leader actions) that are not learning per se. The inclusion of these direct outcomes is an acknowledgement that "learning is often not the primary outcome of [LD] programs…the focus…tends to be on role performance" (Wallace et al., 2021: 3). They note that role performance focus can feed into learning, however. That is, by behaving and acting in particular ways, would-be leaders learn, essentially developing first and second-order learning outcomes via experience and practice.

Although there are some differences between these two models, there are also significant similarities. For instance, both agree that people enter LDPs with different levels of preparedness; Some are highly motivated and prepared whereas others are less so. Both models also suggest that there are proximal and distal outcomes of LD, and that practice over time leads to more complex understandings of leadership. Although Wallace et al. (2021) included a recursive process with zero-order outcomes and Day and Dragoni (2015) did not, Day and colleagues (2009) have made this argument elsewhere. Thus, it seems fair to suggest that there is relative agreement between these models when it comes to the process and outcomes of leadership development.

LD research assessing meanings of leadership. For the purposes of my dissertation, one of the takeaways of this survey of the LD literature is that few have given much attention to what people in organizations think of leadership and leadership development. Underlying all of the above findings is the fact that LDPs function coherently enough to conduct the activities and create the outcomes that Day and Dragoni (2015) and Wallace et al. (2021) outlined. The un-addressed question is *how:* how do programs grapple with leadership's ambiguity in a way that allows for their relatively smooth functioning?

There is some research taking an interpretive or critical approach to LD that comes closer to addressing this point, but none have directly asked it. Carroll and Firth (2020), for instance, assessed participants' narratives of their own leadership after participation in a youth LDP. Their study offered insights into how leadership was given meanings that dampened its potential to motivate change efforts. Clearly, however, a youth LDP is different from an organization-sponsored program for employees. And although Carroll and Firth's (2020) study focused on meanings, it did not address the program's functioning or coherence.

Gagnon and Collinson (2014) also came close to touching on these issues, but their focus was mainly on how a particular set of leadership meanings was applied to participants in an LDP. They did not focus on how the program itself was able to function in the context of these different meanings. Finally, Carroll and Nicholson (2014) and Nicholson and Carroll (2013) theorized and explored interactions between facilitators and participants. This occasionally surfaced conflicting understandings of leadership and brought questions of power into play (e.g., the facilitators' right to define leadership). However, this was a unique context in which the LDP in question was specifically designed to advocate and allow for questioning, and in which critical theories of leadership were taught (in part by members of the author team). Like other studies, their work did not surface the underlying question of how the program itself coheres against the backdrop of these different leadership meanings.

Research questions

Given the ambiguous nature of leadership, the potential for negative outcomes and conflict those divergent meanings create, and the lack of attention paid to this context in the LD literature, study 1 of my dissertation asks:

How does a leadership development program function given the ambiguous meanings applied to leadership?

In study 1 I use inductive qualitative methods to generate an explanation for this question. In short, I draw on the concept of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) to theorize that the ambiguity of leadership can, in a certain type of program, create functional outcomes. I note, however, that the outcomes are functional only from a certain perspective, and may not be functional for all stakeholders.

My explanation in study 1 was surprising in the sense that it challenged my assumption; I assumed that ambiguity was harmful but I found evidence for its functionality (Weick, 1989). In thinking about the implications of my explanation, I was particularly interested in a potential conflict between science and practice. I perceived that maintaining leadership's ambiguity for strategic purposes conflicted with a stated goal of leadership research: to enhance the clarity and precision of the concept of leadership (Carton, 2022). This triggered my interest in exploring aspects of the "science-practice gap" (Banks et al., 2016) in leadership development. Specifically, my second study asks:

How do recommendations in the academic literature on leadership development and leader behavior align and/or misalign with leadership development practitioner claims?

I pursued this idea in a second study that explored the nature and extent of the science-practice gap in LDPs. Here, I identified some of the ways that academic recommendations (in practical implications sections of journal articles) and practitioner claims (on publicly available websites) converge and diverge.

Based in part on ideas from both study 1 and study 2, I end by discussing the broader implications of my findings and the questions they raise for the science and practice of leadership and its development. I depict how my dissertation evolved and progressed over time in Figure 1.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this chapter, I cover the methods I used for studies 1 and 2, including a short explanation motivating my decision to conduct study 2.

Study 1

In study 1, I followed Easterby-Smith et al.'s (2008: 424) four recommendations for conducting rigorous qualitative studies. First, the research design should reflect emergent research questions. This means that the design should alter to adapt to new research questions that arise over the course of data collection. Second, the initial sample should be theoretically purposive, meaning the context and sample under study are chosen based on their potential to provide rich insights into theoretical issues of interest. Third, the analytic strategy should reflect choices that are consistent with the researcher's emerging understanding, meaning that the researcher's interpretations should guide subsequent analytic choices and that connection should be explicit, logical, and coherent. Fourth, research claims should be made subject to alternative perspectives. This means that the researcher takes active efforts to challenge their emerging interpretations. The first and second components have to do with design choices and sample, which I cover when discussing *context, participants,* and *data collection*. The third and fourth components have to do with data analysis, which I cover in chapter 4 when discussing *data analysis and findings*.

My method and data collection strategy were approved by an institutional review board at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (IRB-22-1075).

Context: Capacity. Capacity (a pseudonym) is a non-profit organization that specializes in leadership development. It provides services for clients, which are commonly corporate organizations but also include educational and non-profit organizations. Capacity's main services are its open and custom LDPs. Open programs can be taken by any person who signs up, though participants are often employees of a corporate entity (the client or "buyer"). Custom programs are developed in contact with a client and will typically involve a larger group of the client organization's employees. Open programs are usually a weeklong experience, whereas custom programs can vary in length. Capacity also sells products such as performance evaluation surveys and competency surveys that buyers could use in their own organization.

Capacity was a suitable research site for me to explore my research question. My original research questions asked how convergences and divergences in leadership meanings impacted leadership development. Through my emergent design (documented below), my question evolved to ask how an LDP functions against the backdrop of the ambiguity of leadership. As a research site, Capacity exemplified a great deal of ambiguity about leadership and yet the programs seemed quite successful in the eyes of the facilitators, managers, and participants I interacted with through interviews and observation. Thus, the combination of a high level of functioning with clear ambiguity of leadership created a suitable context for me to explore my research question. Later, I discuss potential boundaries and extensions where my explanation might (not) apply.

Data collection: Interviews. I recruited interview participants by working with an insider at Capacity. Together, we created a flyer that provided a high-level overview of the project and a call for interview participants (see Appendix B). The flyer explained that I was interested in how people's different ideas of leadership came together and impacted leadership development. In the flyer, we asked for 45-60 minutes of participants' time. Participation was voluntary; My interview sample is thus represented by people who chose to opt-in. Given the information provided on the flyer, my participants may be more engaged and interested in conversations about leadership's meaning relative to other employees at Capacity. In my limitations section, I discuss how this might have impacted my findings.

I conducted my interviews via Zoom and recorded them using the software's built-in recording tool. All participants appeared to be at a home- or work-office during the interviews. I used a semi-structured approach to my interviews, meaning there was direction (e.g., an interview guide; see Tables 3A and 3B) but room for adaptation and follow-up questions where relevant (Tracy, 2013). These types of interviews are most appropriate when the researcher has an idea of what they are interested in (e.g., meanings of leadership) but is open to the possibility that they do not yet know what is most interesting or relevant to participants (Tracy, 2013). The decision to remain open was an important one that ultimately allowed me to adjust my central research question given insights gained from early data collection and analysis.

In my interviews, I asked participants to define leadership, to explain what leadership does and does not mean to them, and to explain what the purpose and goals of leadership development are (see Tables 3A and 3B). I often asked these questions in multiple ways. For instance, I asked participants to define leadership, to explain what leadership is *not*, and to reflect on if they see themselves as a leader or not. Each of these questions gets at espoused meanings of leadership from different angles. As my research question became clearer (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008), I began to spend more time asking participants if a particular understanding or definition of leadership was instilled in LD participants. I also asked if LD participants came into the programs with different or even conflicting ideas on leadership and how this was handled (or not handled) by Capacity's facilitators. Although I asked similar questions across my interviews, I did not always follow a particular order, nor did I ask every question of each participant. The reason is that, as Pratt et al. (2020: 7) noted, "qualitative researchers often must tweak and hone questions in the moment of data collection" and "the ordering of questions often varies across interviews, as some informants may jump to a different topic than anticipated."

I took a number of steps to increase the quality of my interviews based on established guidelines. For instance, at the start of each interview I reinforced my commitment to confidentiality and offered to pause or stop the recording if participants felt more comfortable saying anything off the record (Gioia et al., 2013). None of my participants raised concerns or asked me to pause or stop the recording. I also asked participants to describe things in different ways to prevent people from exclusively following cultural scripts (Alvesson, 2003). Finally, I asked participants to ground statements in concrete examples where relevant to encourage them to move away from providing idealized pictures of events (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). For instance, I asked facilitators and managers at Capacity what specific changes (e.g., in behavior, attitude) they would like to see from participants who engaged in an LDP.

I conducted 14 interviews that averaged 56 minutes in length. Of the participants, 11 were current Capacity employees who worked both in and outside of the "classroom" (e.g., in programs). Some worked regularly in programs as facilitators whereas others held managerial responsibilities (e.g., overseeing programs). One participant held a C-suite position while the others held director and middle-manager positions. The remaining three participants were former employees who worked mostly outside the "classroom" but did research work that informed LDP content. Although participants held different positions at Capacity, I included all of them in my analysis because they are equally suited to help me answer my core research question: how do LDPs function against the backdrop of the ambiguity of leadership? That is, since the LDP function was in question, the participants' different positions helped me hone in on potentially shared understandings about the programs.

I transcribed eight interviews myself and had six interviews transcribed by a professional transcribing service. In total, my interviews generated 180 pages of single-spaced text.

Data collection: Observation. I also worked with an insider at Capacity to observe one of the organization's week-long open LDPs. In the program, I engaged as a full participant observer (Spradley, 1980): Neither the program facilitators nor the other participants knew I was conducting research. Thus, there was a small degree of deception. However, I did not lie to participants or facilitators regarding who I was: I told everyone I was a Ph.D. student interested in leadership development and in charge of managing research projects at UNC Charlotte. In addition, I was never asked if I was conducting research, so there was no overt deception (see Roulet et al. 2017 for a discussion of covert observation). I emphasized that the skills I would learn would be especially useful when I took a faculty position. During the course of the program, no facilitator or participant questioned why or how I was in the program. In fact, and as I will discuss more below, many participants had candid and in-depth conversations with me during the various program activities. Together, this suggests that my full participation was accepted by facilitators and participants.

The program I observed was fully virtual and was conducted for four hours each day over the course of five days (20 hours total). It included a variety of experiential, lecture, and active learning strategies. There were 12 other participants and three facilitators in the program. In addition, I interacted with two coaches throughout the program. One coach was assigned to a breakout room during an activity with myself and two other participants, the other coach I interacted with one-on-one for a portion of the last day's session. In total, there were 17 people I observed during the observation sessions with the core group being 12 participants and three facilitators. Throughout the sessions, everyone had their cameras on and most people actively participated in the main room and breakout room sessions.

Before I began my observation sessions, I generated a set of “focusing questions” (Tracy, 2013) designed to help me notice things of value to my research question:

- What meanings of leadership are evoked/espoused/stated?
- How do others react to those stated meanings?
- What meanings of leadership are *not* present?
- How does the concept of leadership relate to the content being taught/discussed?
- How does it relate to the problems people bring up?

These focusing questions were intentionally broad so that I could remain open to where the data pointed me (Pratt et al., 2020).

I followed established guidelines for conducting high-quality observations (Tracy, 2013). Once I had logged on to each Zoom session, I immediately started typing raw records, accounts of “what is going on” in a scene. I tried to “show, not tell”, by describing the scene with a minimal amount of interpretation. I also tried to capture data beyond talk, including other senses (e.g., sight). However, given the virtual context, I found this difficult. That is, there was a limited range of visual cues to make note of, though I did record as much as possible of participants’ tone and posture. Although the virtual context limited the amount of visual stimuli I could capture, it allowed me to type my raw records uninterrupted for long stretches of time. As such, much of my raw records are verbatim quotes of facilitator and participant statements and interactions. Further, when pictures were presented on screen, I took a screenshot of them and pasted them into my notes. I recorded interactions in chat using this method as well, and later transcribed them and deleted the screenshot.

In those cases where I could *not* type verbatim (e.g., when I was actively participating), I followed Tracy's (2013) recommendation to take "headnotes" and record the scene as soon as possible. My general strategy in these cases was: 1) actively participate (e.g., do not type and participate poorly), 2) jot down quick bullet point notes, 3) continue verbatim transcription and 4) during breaks or at the end of the session, expand on the jotted-down bullet points. By following this strategy, I was able to actively participate, keep up with what was happening in the moment, and still record what I was unable to capture verbatim.

At the end of each of the Zoom sessions, and after I had turned my headnotes into raw records, I immediately began to edit my raw records into formal fieldnotes. Tracy's (2013) rule of thumb is to do this within 36 hours. Another advantage of the virtual context was that I was able to do this immediately post-session. For 1-2 hours after the end of the sessions, I read through my raw records, corrected grammatical errors, added information that I remembered but did not have time to write in the moment, and added initial ideas and analysis (in a different color to indicate my own thoughts). During this time, I also changed all names to pseudonyms, transcribed my screenshots (e.g., of chat) into text, and deleted screenshots for confidentiality purposes. Finally, I added information like timestamps, date, length of session, and participants present.

Two key components of rigor in observations are how "close" the researcher was able to get to the scene (Altheide & Johnson, 1998) and how well they demonstrated reflexivity regarding their role and interpretations (Alvesson & Karreman, 2007). I tried to meet these standards by a) participating as fully and authentically as I could in the sessions and b) recording my ongoing thoughts, hunches, and interpretations in my raw records and then field notes.

To the first point, I was able to participate fully in the program and, as such, felt quite close to other participants and the scene as a whole. Further, I was able to share their experiences in the program and I believe they in turn saw me as sharing those experiences. As evidence of this, consider the following interactions in which participants reference me in a way that indicates a degree of closeness and familiarity:

> **Catherine**: It's just tough because in reality how do you get these [desired outcomes]? We are striving for them but how do we get there? And we [referring to her position and others in that position] are leaders but there are leaders above us so it's hard when they're not doing it.
> **Anne**: [leans in, smiles] That's why all leaders need to come through the programs.
> **Catherine**: [laughs] I think they did like 15 years ago.
> **Andrew**: [I joke about them needing a brush up. I ask what it would look like to have good direction]?
> **Anne**: Like stating key goals, really clear goals. That's what I struggle with sometimes because our goals are so lofty, so 'ugh' and its like if I were to do this tomorrow what would it look like? What would I actually do?
> …
> **Catherine**: Well Andrew you know about my fellow supervisor Ken [we laugh]…people under him have no idea what they're supposed to be doing. (Observation - Breakout room with Anne and Catherine).

In this example, Catherine references a previous conversation we had in which she shared some of the frustrations she was having with a fellow manager. As another example of my closeness to the scene, consider the following interaction during which Adam, Robert, and I debrief after engaging in an activity in which we shared and identified each other's values:

> [After the three stories we debrief and chat a bit. We joke about having to "get that beer together" if only we had a place to meet; Adam jokes "guess we're going to LA!"].
> *Back in the main room…*
> **Melanie**: When you're leaning into those feelings, those values, they know it. I'd like to ask about feeling heard. What about this experience helped you to know that you were being heard?
> **Adam**: I felt warm and mushy when my values were shared with me. And I actually think everyone in our team lit up when the values were shared with me. And I think about my assessments, we talk about rating ourselves lower than other people. Andrew noticed my value of community and it's not one I would even have mentioned but it was almost a reminder of the good work you're doing.

As another example, Tyler (a participant) mentioned that he had previously worked in academia and suggested that we should stay in touch to chat about career paths. These excerpts provide evidence that I was able to get close to the scene and other participants in meaningful ways.

Although closeness to the scene is critical for good observation, a researcher should also be able to practice reflexivity and reflect on their experience with and interpretations of the field. As evidence of my ability to practice reflexivity during (and after) observation sessions, consider the following note that I made in my raw records immediately following Day 2 of the program:

> *(Participants reflecting on a breakout room activity in which we role-played conversations in an attempt to solve real work problems)*
> **Catherine**: I said it was kind of like free therapy [group laughs, including facilitators], leadership plus therapy yay! [more smiles/laughs]. I've had this conversation that I've needed to have and it was stressful for me so it was a relief to talk about it in our group.
> **My notes:** Again, Catherine mentions therapy which is in line with Adam's statement about it being 'life-changing'. It's likely easier for me to keep a more skeptical distance because the conversation I roleplayed was essentially made-up. So the life situation was not real for me. Or at least not as real as it was for Catherine and James. In their case, they had actual stressful work conversations hanging over them and this was a chance for them to reflect on it and get help from friendly outsiders (e.g., group members and the coach). In my case, the incident was artificial and thus the outcome did not feel particularly life-changing.

In this case, I was reflecting on one of the few activities in which I was not able to participate authentically. The reason was that I did not have a challenge that I considered to be a truly "leadership" challenge. Thus, I used an example of a situation I had encountered in the past as someone's peer but pretended that I had been their manager for the sake of the activity. In the notes above, I reflected on how this changed my relationship to the activity and gave me more "distance" than other participants experienced.

In total, my observations generated 95.5 pages of single-spaced text. Thus, between the interview material and the observation material, I had approximately 275 pages of qualitative data to work with.

Study 2

I noted above, and will detail below, that my main finding from study 1 is that an organization conducting LDPs can benefit from maintaining the ambiguity of leadership. This finding has broad implications, but one implication that I focus on in study 2 is the potential of a tension between science and practice. Specifically, there is a tension between the idea of *maintaining ambiguity* and *enhancing clarity*, the latter of which I suggest is a key goal of much social science research (Suddaby, 2010). I propose that many leadership researchers would argue that its central concept (i.e. leadership) needs to be made more clear and precise rather than ambiguous (c.f. discussions in Alvesson, 2020; Fischer et al., 2024; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). However, if practitioner organizations benefit from maintaining leadership's ambiguity, this suggests the existence of a fundamental tension between the goals of science and practice.

In study 2, I follow up on my first study's findings by assessing the extent of the science-practice gap in the context of LDPs. Specifically, I attempt to identify if and in what ways there are differences between what the literatures on leadership development and leader behavior *recommend* to practitioners in practical implications sections and what practitioners *claim to do* in their customer-facing materials (e.g., websites). Study 2 can thus provide initial evidence showing if, and in what ways, practitioner claims and academic recommendations misalign.

I focus on academic recommendations because, when aggregated across many articles, they represent the "evidence-based practices" that academics in a field have to offer. On the practitioner side, I focus on claims for two reasons. First, it was impractical to gain meaningful access to the actual practices of LD firms. Claims on publicly available websites were thus a more accessible source of data. Second, claims represent what LD firms are promising to clients and potential customers. They are thus a good representation of an LD firm's strategy for attracting customers and give us insight into what they think is important to say.

I gathered three sources of data: 1) recommendations in the practical implications sections of the leadership development literature, 2) recommendations in the practical implications sections of the leader behavior literature, and 3) claims made on the customer/client-focused online materials of 7 firms with specializations in LDPs.

Data Collection. I made data collection decisions for study 2 in consultation with my faculty advisor. I generated ideas first and then together we iterated on them until we were satisfied with the decision. For the academic sources, I searched two areas for articles that provide LD-relevant recommendations: leadership development and leader behavior. The former is directly relevant to the practice of LD and the latter often provides recommendations for LD because behaviors are viewed as changeable and thus trainable (DeRue et al., 2011). I searched for articles in a specific set of journals (detailed below) because I wanted to assess recommendations from visible, mainstream, and influential articles. Although niche journals are valuable, they are less likely to be influential to practitioners because of their lower visibility. I used two databases that contained all relevant journals to ensure none were missed.

Academic literature: LD. For the academic LD recommendations, I chose to create a list of recommendations provided in the practical implications sections of articles published on leadership development since 2000. I used Business Source Complete and PsycINFO to search for articles in influential management and applied psychology journals (see Table 6). I used the following keywords—based on an existing meta-analytic search on leadership training (Lacerenza et al., 2017)—and specified that the keywords should appear in the abstract: leadership OR leader OR manag* OR executive OR supervisory AND training OR development.

This search generated 160,359 articles. I reduced this list by journal, which left me with 2,276 articles (see Table 6 for the number of results per journal). I read the title and abstract of the 2,276 articles and marked for inclusion only those articles that claimed to focus specifically on leadership development. After screening, I retained 181 articles.

Next, I read the practical (managerial, organizational, etc.) implications sections of the 181 articles. I focused on this section because it is here that academics are explicitly offering recommendations to practitioners. Although it is possible that articles include recommendations elsewhere, I would have to make the inferential leap that academics are speaking to practitioners when doing so. To stay as close as possible to what authors intended to say, I chose to restrict my search to the practical implications section.

Some articles did not contain a practical implications section but included recommendations in their overall discussion section, separated by a paragraph break rather than a header. I included these recommendations. I followed a few other decision rules—developed jointly with my advisor—on whether a recommendation should be included (see Table 8). My final data for the academic LD source was 234 recommendations drawn from 45 included articles (see Figure 2 for an outline of my search and retrieval process).

Academic literature: LB. I repeated the procedure above to gather academic literature on leader behaviors. I again used Business Source Complete and PsycINFO to search for relevant articles since the year 2000. I used the following keywords and specified that the keywords should appear in the article abstract: leadership OR leader OR manag* OR executive OR supervisory AND “behavior” OR “style.”

This generated 61,113 articles. I first reduced this count by the same journal list above (see Table 7 for list plus number of results per journal) which left me with 2,291 articles. I then read the title and abstract of each of the 2,291 articles, marking for inclusion only those articles that appeared to focus specifically on leader behaviors. Articles that mentioned non-leadership behaviors *leading* to outcomes, for instance, were removed. After screening, I was left with 427 articles. Because this was more than double the article count for the LD corpus, I decided, after consultation with my advisor, to further reduced this list to the 5 empirical journals on my article list that I believed were most likely to contain relevant recommendations: *Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Management,* and *The Leadership Quarterly*. This reduced my list of articles to 245.

I read the practical implications section of the 245 articles following similar rules as above (see Table 8 for decision rules). My final data for the academic LB source was 420 recommendations drawn from 154 articles (see Figure 3 for an outline of my search and retrieval process).

Practitioner: Websites. To gather a set of practitioner claims, I first asked a practitioner and subject matter expert—who has 15 years of experience in leadership development—to help generate a list of reputable and influential organizations with specialization in LDPs. I did not specify a number of organizations because I did not want to bias their recommendation. They returned with a list of 7 organizations.

I gathered claims about LDPs by searching each organization's publicly available website. These claims represent client and customer-facing information. For this research question, I restricted my coding to claims that were about LDP content or outcomes. I did not analyze other claims, about, for instance, what leaders need in today's workplace or what the major societal leadership trends are. I perceived that these types of claims were broader and less clearly connected to the organizations' LDPs.

In total, I gathered 324 claims with potentially relevant information about the outcomes participants would experience or the nature of the programs themselves. Because I focused on specific types of claims, I removed others during analysis (146). In total, my practitioner claim source had 178 unique claims from 7 practitioner organizations (see Figure 4 for an outline of my search and retrieval process).

I include relevant Excel and NVivo files in an OSF repository with final versions of my data and coding for study 2: OSF Repository

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this chapter, I outline my analyses and findings for study 1 and study 2. I include these components in one chapter because, due to the inductive nature of the analyses, my findings emerged throughout the process (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

Study 1

For my study 1 data analysis, I adopted the concept of methodological bricolage from Pratt et al. (2022). Bricolage, for Pratt et al. (2022: 217), involves "an active choice of [analytic] moves [taken] from a broad set of methods." The strength of a bricolage approach is that it allows the researcher to tailor their choices to the specific project at hand. To enhance transparency, I describe in detail my process along with an explanation of the analytic "moves" I made throughout (Grodal et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2022).

Preparation. I prepared for data analysis by reading through all my interviews and field notes; Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended this step in their thematic analysis outline as did Tracy (2013) in her general qualitative analysis guidelines. I also created an analytic memo (Ashcraft, 1999; Tracy, 2013), a word document that I organized by date and with which I recorded my ongoing interpretations and analytic moves. Finally, I created a separate folder in which I kept word documents outlining theories and research domain notes. Once I started the constant comparative process of moving back and forth between my data and the literature (Charmaz, 2006), I would reference areas that I was researching in my analytic memo and then take notes and record citations in the separate word documents.

First, after I read through all my material, I used coding as a strategy to organize and make sense of my data.

First-stage coding. I used the qualitative coding software NVivo to organize my data by shared themes. Although coding is not the only way to analyze qualitative data, it is a common and useful strategy to create clarity from hundreds of pages of data (Locke et al., 2022). I created two different NVivo files for my interview and observation data because I wanted to leave open the possibility of important differences between the two sources (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2018).

I chose to begin my analysis by engaging in first-stage (Gioia et al. 2013) “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I made this choice because my research question focused on espoused meanings and thus, it was important early in my analysis to stay close to what participants were expressing. In line with this goal, Gioia et al.’s (2013) recommendation is to begin coding by staying close to participants’ statements and minimizing interpretation. I coded all of my data in this way even when it was not clear if or how it connected to my research questions. In other words, I adopted the idea of an emergent research design and remained open to the possibility that my research question would change (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

In my observation data, I generated codes such as “Using non-work examples,” “Discussing real work challenges,” and “Emphasizing participant responsibility.” In my interview data, I generated codes like: “Differentiating roles,” “Emphasizing mindset,” and “Everyone can do leadership.” In total, I created 129 open codes in my observation data and 157 in my interview data. In some cases, I generated only a few instances (e.g., 1 – 5) of a particular code.

At this point in my analysis, I had primarily been drawing on my data to generate a large number of open codes (Locke et al., 2022). I had also spent time listening to, transcribing, and reading my data. Through this engagement, I formed three “hunches” (Hansen et al. 2023: 16;

Toubiana, 2020: 1749) that were based on aspects of my data that I found surprising or particularly salient (Grodal et al., 2021).

Hunch 1: Many meanings. First, I perceived that there was a wide array of leadership meanings espoused by participants regardless of their role at Capacity. As a result, I suspected that I would find evidence of divergence in meanings but worried that evidence of convergence would be slight and potentially misleading. Misleading because although participants would occasionally provide similar definitions of leadership (e.g., "leadership is a social process that produces X outcomes"), they would go on to espouse numerous other meanings in the same interview or observation session. Thus, although convergence could be found if I looked at statements in isolation, the whole (interview; observation session) revealed the flaw in this strategy.

To follow up on my first hunch, I engaged in focused coding (Gioia et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2022) of all instances where participants applied a meaning to leadership (whether explicitly or implicitly). For instance, I coded John's statement that "[the] social process is sometimes in a little bit of a black box" under a subcode "Black box." Similarly, I coded Jordan's statement that "[the] one that spoke up stepped into that leadership role" in a subcode called "Speaking up." As a last example, I coded Linda's comment in a program session that "You also deal with more ambiguity as you move up. Become comfortable with the discomfort, that's the nature of leadership" as "Being comfortable with ambiguity." All told, I ended up with 85 subcodes, each representing an expressed meaning of leadership, in my interview data. In my observation data, I coded 31 expressed meanings of leadership.

Juxtaposing across my data and theory (Locke et al., 2022), I found that the collection of positively valenced meanings I identified in my data were similar to what other researchers have predicted and/or found (Collinson et al., 2018; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Harding et al., 2011). For instance, I found expressed meanings such as: "actively listening," "building connections," "creating change," "being courageous," "enabling others," "enhancing flow," "guiding from the front," "guiding from the back," "having subordinates," "leading yourself," and more.

I next challenged my hunch by engaging in a negative case analysis (Morse, 2015). Specifically, I looked through my data for instances where participants converged on particular meanings of leadership. I found three general convergences. First, most, if not all, meanings were positive in nature. Second, many participants expressed the idea that different definitions, understandings, and "truths" about leadership exist. Third, Capacity's leadership framework was referenced by many participants across interviews and observations. Nonetheless, this framework a) does not define leadership but rather its outcomes and b) was not the only thing participants mentioned (e.g., they expressed other meanings of leadership). Although these three themes represent convergences, I propose they do not represent a reduction in the ambiguity of leadership. Positive valence does not enhance precision, and the notion of many truths expands rather than reduces ambiguity. Lastly, as I noted, Capacity's framework is not a definition of leadership and thus it maintains the concept's ambiguity. This maintenance of ambiguity is a point I return to later. Next, I turn to the two other salient aspects of my data that I began to hone in on in this stage (Grodal et al., 2021).

Hunch 2: Personalized framing. My second hunch was that there was a consistent reference to LD participants' personal lives, full selves, and adult development. I perceived a highly personalized framing to the process of leadership development; this framing at times took on self-help and therapeutic undertones. In both observations and interviews, I noticed motifs of growth, becoming better people, and expanding mindsets. Further, I noticed that a waiver I signed for the LDP specifically noted that program sessions are *not* therapy. The fact that the waiver needed to state that was a clue to me that it contained content that some people might mistake for therapy.

Despite my perception of this personalized, self-help framing, I did not yet know if or in what way it was relevant to my research question. However, I chose to follow this emerging trend given its salience (Grodal et al., 2021). To do so, I engaged in focused coding to try and capture this personalized framing in my data (Locke et al., 2022).

Through this process, I generated 7 codes. First was “Invoking non-work concepts,” in which interview participants or program facilitators brought up non-work contexts as relevant to leadership and development. For instance, Jordan comments:

> One is at the individual level, how you are leading out in your family, in the world, with your friends, that kind of thing, or within your organization. And so all the tools that we share can be applied either way (Jordan - Interview).

Another code I developed was “Goal: Make better people.” Illustrative of this code is Margo’s statement about the big-picture goal of leadership development:

> I had my [sibling] say something to me once and it was like really profound. He was kind of like ‘what if we could make…people’s work everyday during the day-to-day, make them better people when they go home’. Like, like, as if that is, that is the end goal (Margo - Interview).

The other codes I developed as a result of following this hunch were “Leadership journey,” “Moralizing development,” “Participant transformation,” “Participant self-awareness,” and “Transferability of program tools.” Each of these indicates a highly personalized view of leadership development, where one goes on a “journey” of “transformation” and expanded “self-awareness.” On this journey, participants become better people (“moralizing”) who can “transfer” what they learn to all parts of their life.

I perceived this collection of themes as important and related, yet I was still unsure how or why they were important to my research question. It was not until later in my analysis, when conceptualizing boundary conditions, that I developed a fuller understanding of their relevance. Before that, I turned to my third hunch.

Hunch 3: Divergence doesn't matter. My third hunch was that the divergence in leadership meanings that I was identifying in my data did not matter to my participants or to the functioning of the programs. Although it is hard to pinpoint the *absence* of something, I did not identify conflict or confusion in my observation sessions, nor did my interview participants suggest that conflict and confusion were common in programs. When conflict was discussed, it seemed that the ambiguity in leadership meanings may have been helpful rather than harmful; this is a point I return to later.

At this stage of my analysis, I adopted a constant comparative approach by cycling back and forth between my data and the literature (Charmaz, 2006; Locke et al., 2022). I had begun with the assumption that ambiguity could, in theory, be harmful to the development process. This assumption was based in part on research linking role ambiguity to negative outcomes like lower satisfaction, lower performance, and negative emotions (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2007; Schmidt et al., 2014; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Further, there is a high degree of face-validity to the notion that ambiguity around what we are developing could create problems in programs designed to develop a thing. Thus, I found the lack of apparent problems to be a salient component of my data.

Formation of my research question. After following up on my three hunches, which themselves resulted from deep engagement with my data, I began to rethink the framing of my key research question (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). Although I was still interested in convergences and divergences in meaning, the key puzzle at hand seemed to be: how do LDPs function despite the divergence in leadership meanings? Essentially, I found so many espoused meanings of leadership, yet so little evidence of problems we might expect this to cause, that this became my central research question.

Reframing my research question in this way also aligned my focus with the perspective of Todd, a C-suite manager at Capacity:

> So um let me reframe it a little bit. People do have different perspectives [on leadership]. That's a given. And you're never gonna be aligned around it…So how do we embrace, in an inclusive way, those different views and experiences and still come out of it with common understanding, alignment…to something that goes beyond your individual responsibilities. And that, that's the, that would be the goal of leadership development (Todd - Interview).

For Todd, divergence in leadership meanings is a given. The question is thus how to bring people together with this ambiguity. My emergent research question was similar: how does the development "show" go on against the backdrop of the ambiguity of leadership?

Challenging an assumption: Is ambiguity useful? Weick (1989) proposed that when our moderately held assumptions (versus weakly or strongly held ones) are challenged, it triggers a reaction ("that's interesting") that serves as a clue and motivator for theorizing. As I noted above, I found limited evidence suggesting that ambiguity was creating visible problems in the development process. This broke a moderately held assumption and spurred me to explore why this was the case.

It was during this stage of theorizing that I made a connection to Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity. I was familiar with the paper (published in a communication journal) because it was assigned by an organizational communication researcher who I took a class with in my doctoral training. In his 1984 paper, Eisenberg challenged the idea that strategic communications were most effective when they were clear, direct, and easy to interpret. He introduced the idea of strategic ambiguity to describe and explain how communications that were *unclear* could be beneficial from the perspective of the communicator. Communications that lack clarity, are indirect, and can be interpreted in multiple ways create space around which multiple groups of listeners can support the communicator without sharing an interpretation. Eisenberg (1984) called this "unified diversity."

The context for Eisenberg's (1984) theorizing was strategic communication, however I saw a parallel to concepts. Specifically, I connected the ambiguity of *leadership*, a concept, to Eisenberg's (1984) notion of strategically ambiguous communications. I began to wonder if groups that deploy the concept of leadership (e.g., Capacity, other LD firms, consultants) benefit to the extent that they frame it in ambiguous ways. Hints of this argument can be found in leadership research that discusses meanings of leadership. Kelly's (2014) argument that leadership acts as an empty signifier, a stand-in for a multitude of concepts, implies that leadership's ambiguity may be functional for some groups, but Kelly does not expand on this implication. Learmonth and Morrell (2021) also identified the historical trend of the word "leader," and argued that its application can serve political functions. Finally, Alvesson and Blom (2021) identified leadership as an example of what they call a "hembig": hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts that crowd out more precise concepts and expand to include ever more contexts and meanings.

In the above articles, there is an element of critique at work: the authors largely criticize the vagueness, expansiveness, and political nature of leaders and leadership (as concepts). As such, they understandably pay less attention to possible functional aspects of ambiguity. These authors rightly point out the problems ambiguity can have for research, for society, and for elements of practice (e.g., those interested in applying research findings). But is it possible that for certain groups, the ambiguity of leadership is helpful?

At this point, I turned back to my data with two goals. First, I needed to see if the ambiguity of leadership, rather than being a static background, was being actively maintained. If so, this would provide some evidence for the idea that ambiguity was being leveraged rather than ignored, downplayed, or reduced. Second, I would need to see if there was evidence of the functionality of ambiguity for Capacity's goals.

Is the ambiguity of leadership actively maintained? I started by exploring if the ambiguity around leadership was actively maintained. In this process, I went beyond describing the leadership meanings expressed and instead looked at *how* people discussed leadership as a concept and leadership development as a process. I prepared to code by drawing on my engagement with the strategic ambiguity and leadership meanings literatures as well as on the coding I had already completed (Locke et al., 2022). In line with the Merriam-Webster definitions I cited above, I refer to an ambiguous framing of leadership as one in which the concept is not sharply defined but rather left open to multiple interpretations and meanings (see also van Nordenflycht, 2023 for a discussion of clarity and precision) During this coding process, I did not assume intentionality. That is, I did not assume that people at Capacity were consciously leveraging the ambiguity of leadership in the same way that a politician might consciously alter the wording of a speech to be strategically ambiguous (Eisenberg, 1984). Instead, by "actively maintained," I am referring to the idea that words *do* things even if the speaker does not intend it (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021). Thus, I coded for statements in my interviews or observations (from Capacity employees), that seemed to maintain or extend the ambiguity of leadership.

In my interviews, I coded 122 such statements. In my observations, because of the smaller number of statements to work with (e.g., facilitators did not talk the whole time), I coded 25 such statements. Because I was interested in theorizing the process by which ambiguity is maintained, I further refined this code (Locke et al., 2022) and asked: Through what communication strategies is the ambiguity of leadership maintained? I found five communication patterns: 1) use of general, non-specific language, 2) meaning expansion, 3) defining by effects, 4) implying complexity, and 5) avoiding a definition (see Table 4 for code definitions and Table 5 for additional evidence for the following 5 codes).

Use of general, non-specific language. The first communication pattern was the use of general, non-specific language to describe leadership (*18 interview references, 4 observation references*). For instance, Amanda's statement below exemplifies this pattern because it uses broad language that can be interpreted in multiple ways and repeats "lead" and "leadership" in the definition:

> Um, and you know, faculty see it in in the classroom on a weekly basis, um and you know are able to get the glow of that. Um, so yeah the human centered is, you know, how do you truly lead people? Um, from that place of, again: psychological safety and trust and relationship-building, and um you know that idea of yeah, being a good leader. Um, being someone who thinks about and takes care of people and the organization and, you know, society at large (Amanda – Interview)

Similarly, Linda's statement in an observation session represents this communication pattern because it employs multiple broad and weighty words (e.g., authentic, powerful, inspiring) at once, thereby not specifying what exactly leadership means:

> Yeah that is a part of leadership - you can't necessarily share the whole truth, the whole situation…Sometimes there's a box we're put in where we can't share everything. But we still want to be authentic, powerful, inspiring (Linda [facilitator] - Observation).

Meaning expansion. The second communication pattern I identified was the expansion of leadership's meaning (*42 interview references, 15 observation references*). Similar to what

Alvesson and Blom (2021) identified when coining the term hembig, this code describes cases where participants referenced abilities, contexts, or behaviors that stretch what leadership is and where it happens. At the extreme, this means statements like Olivia's where everything is leadership:

> What, what is the landscape of leadership? When we say it's a social process, it actually means everything, everything you say and everything you don't say, everything everyone else does and doesn't do in your system is is part of that interdependent creation (Olivia - Interview).

In less extreme cases, this code captures statements like Rebecca's below where she implies that leadership encapsulates the idea of having a voice in a collective. This is meaning expansion because it implies that voice, or even speaking up in a collective environment, falls under the domain of leadership (i.e., it cannot be its own thing or something else entirely):

> **Andrew**: Do you think people should try it [engaging in leadership]?
> **Rebecca**: I do.
> **Andrew**: And why? What's the benefit of that?
> **Rebecca**: The benefit is: their voice gets heard in kind of a collective, as part of a collective contribution (Rebecca - Interview).

As a final example, meaning expansion also happens when people describe more and more behaviors as examples of leadership. For instance, one of the program facilitators, Linda, described a subordinate she once had who asked her "how do I support this [project]? What is my role in making sure this is getting done"? Linda described this behavior as "initiating great leadership" (Observation). Her description fits the idea of meaning expansion because it takes a behavior that is arguably representative of followership and relabels it as leadership. In doing this, she broadens the boundaries of leadership, which makes it less precisely defined.

Defining by effects. A third communication pattern I identified was defining leadership by its effects (*39 interview references, 3 observation references*). As some have noted in recent years, these definitions are common in leadership research and make it difficult to separate the process of leadership from the outcomes it creates (Alvesson, 2020; Fischer & Sitkin, 2022; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). In my data, these statements maintained the ambiguity of leadership by keeping the so-called "black box" of leadership untouched. Some participants recognized this:

> So that's as close as we've come [referring to a definition by outcomes]. Which is really not a definition of leadership, it's more a description of the outcomes of leadership (Reid - Interview).

In other cases, program facilitators drew on the outcomes that leadership can have to explain what good leadership is:

> So when we think about Capacity, how we define leadership…We say that leadership is a social process. And you may have heard me say this before, if you have created a culture of leadership, that enables everybody to work together as a cohesive group, and you're willing to work together as a group, then that is leadership (Linda [facilitator]– Observation).

Implying complexity. A fourth communication pattern I identified was implying complexity (*24 interview references, 2 observation references*). These are statements that imply leadership is something that is difficult to understand, difficult to do, and difficult to develop. For instance, take this response from Charlotte:

> **Andrew**: Why do you think it's so important to kind of frame [leadership] that way? Instead of the, 'here's the answer' way?
> **Charlotte**: Well because it's not an answer [laughs]. It's a way of thinking, it's a – and I'm sure that it will continue to evolve; thinking tends to develop towards more complexity. And so um I'm sure there will be even more interesting, complex ways to think about leadership (Charlotte - Interview).

Implying complexity maintains the ambiguity of leadership because it makes leadership out to be something huge, ever-shifting, and almost mystical in nature (Tourish, 2013 makes a similar argument). The complexity of leadership was also implied by program facilitators who emphasized the wide-ranging and multi-faceted nature of the program:

> Let me tell you about this program…it switches up, we cover a lot of various things, but it all comes together at the end. If this program doesn't make sense to you at the end of the day, you're in the right place; if you're expecting to be satisfied by the end of the day, I got news for you, it ain't happening. At around Friday or thereabouts, it'll start making sense, so just soak it in (Melanie [facilitator] - Observation).

Avoiding a definition. The last communication pattern I identified was the explicit avoidance of a definition of leadership (*19 interview references, 1 observation reference*). Although the previous four communication patterns *imply* avoidance, this fifth code captures direct avoidance. For instance, take Emilia's comment where she pushes back on the idea that a definition of leadership is required in the development process:

> It's about their leadership. Okay. Um, so I would re-swizzle that. It's not about a define - a definition of leadership. It's more about—and actually this is one of the questions that we ask them in our discovery interviews—is what is the purpose of this team? (Emilia - Interview).

Linda also referenced this once in the program itself, noting that:

> At Capacity when we first started…we didn't want to actually come up with what leadership was [smiles]. Leadership was a really big topic and we didn't want it to be the flavor of the month…you know a book comes out and 'oh that's what leadership is', another article is written, 'that's what leadership is'. We really wanted to focus on consistency (Linda [facilitator] - Observation).

Negative case analysis. This coding process resulted in an overarching code: "Maintaining the ambiguity of leadership," with five subcodes that capture the communication patterns through which ambiguity is maintained. To enhance the rigor of my process, I conducted a negative case analysis (Morse, 2015) where I looked for participant communications that decreased the ambiguity of leadership. Through this process, I found two categories of statements: one in which participants denied certain meanings of leadership (24 total references) and one in which participants gave specific meanings of leadership (22 total references).

Although I coded 24 and 22 references, respectively, this analysis ultimately enhanced my confidence that ambiguity maintenance was the norm. This is because, even in my negative case statements, participant communications were quite vague and often seemed to take additional effort. For instance, Amanda has a hard time coming up with an example of a “wrong way” to enact leadership, and eventually settles on the broad notion of micro-management:

> Ah gosh, is there a wrong way? Umm…I don’t know…that we would…say that. I mean, you know, most companies want to work on the idea of empowerment. So I mean we wouldn’t want them to come out thinking they need to micromanage everybody. (Amanda - Interview)

Thus, even though Amanda’s statement does deny a particular meaning of leadership (i.e., micromanagement), it does not strongly reduce the ambiguity of leadership because it implies that anything besides micromanagement is acceptable. In another example, I coded Rebecca’s statement below as a denial of certain leadership meanings. Yet the meaning denial here does not add precision to leadership, it simply pushes back on the idea of born leaders:

> So part of it is the idea that people are born leaders. Um I would try and dissuade people from that. You know that it’s a skill, an ability that you’re born with and not that it’s something that’s developed. Um I would also try and dissuade people from thinking that just their social identity group could be leaders. That other social identity groups can lead as well. So those would be things where I think I would really advocate a stronger position and try and help people to understand that. (Rebecca - Interview)

The second category I coded in my negative case analysis was specific meanings of leadership. This captures instances where participants state or imply a specific definition or understanding of leadership. For instance, take Nicole’s statement below that implies a clear “pure definition” of leadership:

> **Andrew**: So let me ask, would you consider yourself to be a leader?
> **Nicole**: Yeah. I don't know. I feel corny saying that, but I think technically I have people report to me. So pure definition, I am (Nicole - Interview).

Here, Nicole is giving a specific definition of leadership (i.e., leadership is having direct reports). However, at other points in the interview she expressed different meanings of leadership. For instance, she later states:

> It's conceptually that leadership is a collective process. For leadership to happen, it's done through a team or community of people (Nicole – Interview).

Thus, although people occasionally gave specific definitions of leadership—clearly stating what it is and what its boundaries are—these statements were often preceded or followed by a variety of additional meanings. In this way, my negative case analysis made me more confident that the maintenance of ambiguity was pervasive.

Strategic ambiguity. I noted earlier that my strategy was to first assess if the maintenance of ambiguity was an active (if not intentional) process. I addressed that with the coding above. My second step was to explore if the maintenance of ambiguity could be said to be strategic (Eisenberg, 1984). That is, does it help Capacity meet organizational goals?

To answer this question, I engaged in focused coding, looking for evidence speaking to the impact ambiguity might have for Capacity and the development process (Locke et al. 2022). I found evidence for three functional impacts: expansion of *who* Capacity can talk to, expansion of *what* Capacity can talk about, and a *smoothing* of program functioning (see Table 4 for code definitions and Table 5 for additional evidence for each of the codes).

Expand who. First, I propose that by maintaining the ambiguity of leadership, Capacity expands its customer base (*29 references in interviews, 3 in observation*). The less specific, narrow, or bounded that leadership is as a concept, the more easily applicable it is to a wide range of people. If leadership can be applied to almost anything, then leadership *development* is for everyone. This latter idea, that development is for everyone, was mostly shared by the facilitators I spoke to. When I asked Garrett if leadership development was for everyone, he responded:

> Yes, I think development is for everybody…those incrementals may be very small for some, much larger for others (Garrett - Interview).

The idea that development can be for everyone was part of a strategic goal for Capacity according to Todd in this exchange:

> **Andrew**: And uh, would you say – in an ideal world, putting aside maybe barriers to this – would you want to see everybody engage in leadership development of some form?
> **Todd**: Everybody is, already. Cause, you know, the 70/20/10 thing…But uh people are not afforded, very few of the world's population is afforded opportunities to engage in structured, evidence-based leadership development. And so would I like that to happen? Yeah. And in fact, part of our strategy long has been scalable leadership development (Todd – Interview).

I did not code many instances of this subcode in my observation sessions because discussions of who can do leadership were less common there. We focused more on specific challenges and tools, which I turn to in my next subcode. However, facilitators did make a strong claim that leadership can be exercised regardless of one's formal role:

> And I want you to write this down: It doesn't matter what role you are in, you can exercise your leader role…Paul [in chat] reinforces: It does not matter what role you're in for you to be a leader, you can exert your leadership role no matter what role you're in (Linda & Paul [facilitators] - Observation).

In sum, by maintaining ambiguity around what leadership is and what it means, Capacity can serve a wide group of people. Counterfactually, if leadership were narrowly defined, I suggest it would be difficult to provide programs that serve a broad set of people who work in various roles, organizations, and industries. As a firm focusing on leadership development, Capacity's client base expands as leadership expands.

Expand what. Second, I propose that maintaining the ambiguity of leadership expands the content that Capacity can cover (*44 references in interviews, 53 in observations*). If leadership is a term without clear boundaries, it becomes easier to relate it to many different tasks and problems. In turn, if many tasks and problems can be related to leadership, Capacity can offer services covering those tasks and problems for potential clients, all under the appealing banner of leadership development. I found evidence suggesting that this content expansion is working;

when I asked Jordan whether client organizations ever question if their problem is relevant to leadership, he responded like this:

> So the clients don't get into the, 'Okay, well we don't really need leadership,' but we'll just bring—I don't even think they're thinking that heavily about it. It's more 'we have a need, we need to redesign our vision, or we're having some trust issues.' Or 'I have a new team, Capacity does great work, let's just pull them in and have them do some stuff for us.' I think it's really just that simple, to be honest with you (Jordan - Interview).

Jordan is saying that, from his perspective, clients do not consider the meaning of leadership and whether Capacity, as a leadership development firm, can help them if their problem does not relate to leadership. Instead, the assumption from clients seems to be that Capacity is clearly equipped to help them with vision, trust issues, or whatever else. I am proposing that the ambiguity of leadership is part of why clients make this assumption: trust issues, redesigning vision, DEI, and more can all be addressed by Capacity if they are related to the concept of leadership.

Further, the expansion of what Capacity can talk about had real benefits for program functioning and participants in the program I engaged in. By maintaining ambiguity around what leadership is, Capacity was able to relate it to a myriad of participants' real work problems. This is important, because Capacity cannot predict ahead of time what participants will bring to the table. As such, ambiguity creates the necessary space and flexibility to talk about anything. This obviates the need to pause or consider if the problem is "really" a leadership-relevant one. Consider the exchange I referenced earlier in which James and Catherine reflect on a program activity with group members:

> **James**: For our group, it was a relief because we got some real-life things off our chest. So just having a mock of how that's going to go when we do it.
> **Catherine**: I said it was kind of like free therapy [group laughs, including Linda], leadership plus therapy yay! [more smiles/laughs]. I've had this conversation that I've needed to have and it was stressful for me so it was a relief to talk about it in our group (Participants- Observation).

The problems that James and Catherine discussed were, arguably, not clearly related to leadership. James was having trouble with a direct report who had been repeatedly late for work, and Catherine was frustrated with a peer who did not seem willing to listen to her opinion. One could argue both are related to leadership, or that they are inherently about leadership because James and Catherine are managers. My point holds regardless: Because of the ambiguity around what is and is not leadership at Capacity, the program facilitators and participants did not have to consider this question or pause and ask if their most pressing challenge could be brought up in the activity. Instead, participants could bring those challenges up without fear, and know that they would be addressed. In this way, I suggest that maintaining the ambiguity of leadership expands what the program can cover and reflect on in a way that has real benefits for facilitators, participants, and Capacity.

Smooth functioning. Third and finally, I propose that maintaining the ambiguity of leadership can smooth the functioning of programs by preventing conflict between and among facilitators and participants who may hold different ideas about what leadership is (*20 references in interviews, 14 in observation*). By *not* taking a strong stance on what leadership means, Capacity allows a thousand definitions to bloom under "unified diversity" (Eisenberg, 1984). If every definition has truth to it, then there is no need to argue over them. Margo notes that her job as a facilitator is not to shut down any particular perspective, but rather to acknowledge all perspectives:

> **Andrew**: Does conflict ever come up or tension between participants when they're kind of sharing these different conceptions [of leadership]?
> **Margo:** Yeah, for sure I would say. And conflict is just a different way of looking at something, right? So it's just a difference of opinion or a different way of viewing something and I think, to me, our job as facilitators is to see the the, you know, to see the whole of it. To see 'yes, and,' you know to encourage that kind of thought process with people (Margo - Interview).

In the program, I saw this manifest in the way multiple different ideas around leadership could be shared without any visible conflict or disagreement. For instance, I asked in a breakout room how other participants thought about the role of a leader:

> **Tyler**: I see the leader role in our organization as advocating for what our team does…when thinking about resource allocation etc. if I'm not advocating for what needs to be changed it's not going to get better.
> **Adam**: In my role I look to leadership for alignment and direction. What our outcomes are…if we are navigating through change, what are logistics through change. I think the qualities listed under leader can work under the others (e.g., manager, coach).
> **Brandon**: The inspire part (holds one hand palm up, like he's raising something or holding a ball) feels like it's at a higher level [smiles]. But I do think some of it falls under the other levels. I do think we can do leadership in the other levels. I don't see it as totally separate roles. (Participants - Observation)

In the program, all of these answers were treated as correct. Facilitators in interviews invoked the idea of "yes, and…" to refer to acknowledging a participant's perspective as correct and helping them see how others' have validity too. Thus, maintaining ambiguity around what leadership is smooths program functioning by preventing conflict over that very question. Charlotte also noted that ambiguity is not something that clients care about:

> "You rarely get any pushback from people that actually are out in the world working and trying to get things done. Who do we get the biggest pushback from? Other leadership scholars. They say 'that's too big of a definition.'" (Charlotte – Interview)

For Capacity, clients and program participants are necessarily a more important stakeholder than leadership academics, so it holds that they would generally be more concerned with how the former think than the latter.

Theorizing a boundary condition. At this stage, I had an explanation of how the leadership development process could function with the ambiguity of leadership: I propose that the ambiguity takes on a strategic form that expands Capacity's client base and the content they can cover and smooths over potential conflict in programs. However, I perceived that the personalized framing of development was integral to what Capacity was doing and I had yet to explain its relevance to my theorizing. In other words, I had not yet put all the patterns in my data together (Locke et al., 2022).

To do so, I engaged in “thought trials” (Weick, 1989) or mini “thought experiments” (Kornberger & Mantere, 2020). Specifically, I questioned if my explanation would hold in different types of LDPs: If a program provided “universal knowledge” or more narrowly focused on leadership in the workplace, would ambiguity take on strategic functions? I think the answer is no, and that my explanation “works” in part because the programs at Capacity have a personalized framing. Without that framing, maintaining the ambiguity of leadership is more likely to prompt conflict: If there *is* a universal definition of leadership, then not everyone’s perspective can have value. As such, conflict is more likely to ensue. Further, if a program were to avoid a personalized framing but simultaneously maintain ambiguity around leadership, these themes would seem to conflict. If you are providing a “right” answer, then people might expect your answer to be clear. Capacity is not claiming to provide one right answer, and thus does not need to provide perfect clarity.

My proposition is that the highly personal framing of LD is a boundary condition, a necessary contextual feature that allows the maintenance of ambiguity to take on strategic functions. Absent this personalized framing, maintenance of ambiguity may not take on strategic functions and may even spur negative outcomes like confusion and conflict (see Table 4 for a definition and Table 5 for evidence of personalized framing in my data).

Study 1 summary. The result of my study 1 analysis is a proposed theoretical explanation for my emergent research question: How can the leadership development process function in light of the ambiguity of leadership as a concept? My iterative analysis helped me propose an answer: Maintaining the ambiguity of leadership has strategic functions for a leadership development firm that frames development as a highly personalized journey. I identified five communication patterns that maintain the ambiguity of leadership and linked that maintenance to three strategic functions. I then bounded my explanation by identifying the personalized framing of leadership development as a necessary condition for the emergence of the strategic functions.

Study 2

One of the implications of study 1 is the possibility of a tension between practice and certain precepts of science (see Figure 1). Researchers in management and applied psychology, and in the social sciences more broadly, generally seek to enhance the clarity of concepts like leadership. For instance, in a frequently cited article Suddaby (2010: 352) argued that construct clarity is “critical to the accumulation of knowledge” because constructs are the building blocks of our theories. Many researchers would agree that basic conceptual clarity is a necessary condition for generating knowledge. In fact, for some researchers this is beyond debate. Johnson et al. (2012: 63) strongly claimed that it is “undeniable” that “clear and concise construct definitions are a prerequisite for successful theory-building and research.”

In the leadership domain, researchers have argued that a *lack* of construct clarity has contributed to flawed and even uninterpretable findings (e.g., Alvesson & Einola, 2018; Fischer et al., 2024; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Although certain research orientations might place relatively greater emphasis on clarity (e.g., positivist traditions), I suggest that all research orientations in management and applied psychology place at least some importance on developing clear concepts. As just one example, Ladkin and Probert (2021) spent multiple pages outlining Foucault’s conceptualization of power and how it overlaps and differs from other conceptualizations. Although their philosophical perspective on power differs from positivist perspectives, the authors still found value in outlining and clearly explaining the concept.

To summarize, I suggest that maintaining and enhancing the clarity of concepts—such as leadership—is a key goal of most social scientific research. Yet my study 1 findings suggest that practitioners of LDPs might benefit from maintaining leadership's conceptual ambiguity. This raises the possibility of a fundamental tension between the science and practice of LDPs. Such a tension might contribute to the maintenance or widening of the science-practice gap, which refers broadly to the idea that there is a split or divergence between what management researchers study or recommend and what practitioners care about or do (Banks et al., 2016; Barnett, 2024; Gioia, 2021).

Data Analysis

In chapter 3, I explained that I gathered three sources of data for study 2: recommendations in the practical implications sections of leadership development journal articles, recommendations in the practical implications sections of leader behavior journal articles, and claims about leadership development programs on practitioner websites.

Across all three data sources, I used Gioia et al.'s (2013) inductive coding approach to analyze my data (see Figures 5-7 for final data structures). My goal in study 2 was to understand *what* was being said in these different areas, and then to interpret potential similarities and differences. Study 2 thus complements study 1 by following up on a key implication of the latter's findings: That there may be a fundamental conflict between the goals of science (clarity) and the goals of LDPs (strategic ambiguity). Whereas I asked a *how* question in study 1, I am asking a *what* question in study 2, so my data analysis here is relatively more descriptive.

Gioia et al.'s (2013) method begins with first-order analysis, where the researcher applies largely descriptive codes to text (in my case, recommendations or claims). First-order analysis is similar to the idea of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In general, I tried to stay close to what the text was saying when creating first-order concepts (see Table 9 for examples). These concepts are thus largely descriptive, although they still represent a slightly higher level of abstraction as compared to the text itself (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, one recommendation from the LD corpus read: "An organizational stance could involve support for such activities and a context that creates space for leaders to deliberately practice leadership." To this recommendation I applied a first-order concept labeled "organizations should create space to practice leadership." In the practitioner corpus, one claim read: "Learn how to accelerate change in an organization; develop a deep understanding of what is required to drive change and make it last." To this claim I applied a first-order concept called "learn to drive change."

As Gioia et al. (2013: 20) noted, the researcher will start to see "similarities and differences among the many [first-order] categories" as the research progresses. I made note of my emerging ideas in an analytic memo (Ashcraft, 1999; Tracy, 2013). For instance, I made note of concepts I thought might be able to be combined and ones that I thought might be at too high of a level (and thus would need to be broken down).

Once I had applied first-order concepts to all relevant pieces of data, I transitioned to what Gioia et al. (2013) call second-order analysis. Here, the researcher asks: "Is there some deeper structure in this array [of first-order concepts]?" (Gioia et al., 2013: 20). In the academic LD recommendations, for example, I noticed a variety of first-order concepts (e.g., creating space to practice leadership, developing a safe culture for learning, supporting a culture of experimentation and feedback) that all had to do with what I termed "*[establishing] an* *environment that supports leadership development*." This second-order theme captures the more specific manifestations represented by the first-order concepts (i.e., the example I quoted above). Another recommendation that fit under this second-order theme reads:

> Given the range of human resource practices that may be imbued with fixed or growth mindset messages, conducting an audit of mindset cues at the macro level may facilitate tweaking and even adapting human resource management practices in light of their mindset implications in order to support leaders (and other employees) in learning from their experiences

Although this recommendation is distinct in specific ways from the example I cite earlier, they both represent the broader idea of establishing an environment supportive of leadership development.

Similarly, in the practitioner claims I noticed a combination of first-order concepts (e.g., learn to drive change, how to support innovation, be a transformative force in the organization) that were all oriented towards what I called "*fostering change-oriented leaders*." For instance, one website claim read: "This program prepares leaders to adopt new ways of working by unlocking the critical mindsets and behaviors to accelerate personal and business transformation." Although distinct from the earlier example I cite, in which change is explicitly mentioned, this claim nonetheless falls under the same second-order banner of fostering change-oriented leaders. Second-order themes thus capture a higher-level idea that then manifests in more specific ways, as represented by different first-order concepts.

With first-order concepts and second-order themes generated, Gioia et al. (2013: 20) recommended "[investigating] whether it is possible to distill the emergent 2nd-order themes even further into 2nd-order 'aggregate dimensions.'" In my data, I had a number of second-order themes across my three sources (e.g., 22 in academic LD, 24 in academic LB, 11 in practitioner). I also saw connections between these second-order themes and thus decided to investigate them further to generate aggregate dimensions. In the academic LB recommendations, for example, I identified three second-order themes (adjust behavior to fit the situation, adjust behavior to fit followers, teach behavioral flexibility) that I propose represent a higher-level dimension: "*match behavior to context*." In total, I ended with 7 aggregate dimensions in the academic LD source, 6 in the academic LB source, and 5 in the practitioner source (see Figures 5-7).

Gioia et al. (2013: 22) also discussed how data structure (e.g., Figures 5-7) can be used to build a process model that shows "the dynamic relationships among the emergent concepts." I did not take this additional step because my goal was not to develop a grounded process model. Instead, my goal was to generate abstract dimensions, attached to more specific manifestations, that capture the essence of what is being said in two distinct areas (science and practice). I then compared these dimensions and their manifestations to identify areas of (mis)alignment between them.

Throughout my analysis, I kept an analytic memo (Ashcraft, 1999; Tracy, 2013) where I wrote down ideas, notes, and changes. At times, when I made a new code, I realized that other recommendations/claims fit in that code better than where I had coded them previously. In addition, when I started to create second-order themes, I realized that their names could be adjusted to represent the first-order concepts beneath them more accurately. In tables 10, 11, and 12, I list some examples of name changes I made in each data source along with a short explanation for the change.

In the practitioner dataset, I sometimes applied two or more codes to one claim. Table 13 lists two examples of this. Note that in the academic-LD and academic-LB coding, there were no recommendations with multiple codes applied. This was due to the difference in how I collected recommendations and claims. When I gathered the data for the academic coding, I copied and pasted specific recommendations. Thus, in the process of "gathering" the data, I essentially made sure that each recommendation was singular. In contrast, with the practitioner websites, I copied and pasted chunks of text that happened to be together. This meant that each practitioner claim was more likely to include multiple concepts. My different strategy here was a result of the data being gathered from fundamentally different sources (academic journal articles versus organization websites). Nonetheless, this is a limitation I reflect on in my discussion for study 2.

The result of my analysis is a set of inductively derived aggregate dimensions—manifested in more specific second-order themes and then first-order concepts—that I can use to compare academic recommendations with practitioner claims (see Table 14 for a summary of this comparison).

Findings

Academic recommendations (LD). I generated 7 aggregate dimensions representing the recommendations from academic literature on leadership development (see Appendix C for additional evidence for the following dimensions). *Emphasize participant agency* captures the idea that development efforts should highlight the role of the individual participant in seizing opportunities, driving their own development, and making deep-level changes. Illustrative of this aggregate dimension is the recommendation to "Actively [use] participants to help design and develop part of the curriculum (e.g., participants run activities, online feedback forums, co-construction of assignments)." *Include experiential learning* captures the idea that LDPs should have opportunities to practice enacting leadership (preferably in consequential settings). For instance, one recommendation under this umbrella dimension reads: "Furthermore, authentic leader development is not performed only in the leader's head. Authentic leaders find their voice by acting in the world, receiving feedback, and reflecting on the consequences of their actions."

Context must support development reflects the idea that participants' home organization needs to support their development efforts. *Evaluate and follow-up* represents the idea that an LDP should be followed-up with additional activities and that all of these activities should be evaluated for their level of success. An illustrative recommendation from this dimension reads: "…to ensure future development for both leaders and the field of leadership development, organizations should evaluate their leadership development initiatives using validated measures before and after the initiative, and not only at the end of the program."

Create alignment refers to the idea that people and organizations involved in LD should be on the same page in terms of why it is being conducted, who it is being conducted with, and how it fits with the organization's goals and practices. An example in this dimension recommends that organizations "Conduct a needs analysis and identify the desired outcome(s) based on stakeholder goals before designing the program." *Use various development strategies* captures the idea that an LDP should include a mixture of learning strategies and activities. An illustrative recommendation reads: "Use multiple delivery methods when possible (e.g., information, demonstration, and practice) and if limitations prevent this, choose practice instead of other delivery methods." Lastly, *broaden development content* refers to the idea that LD can and should be used to address broader issues such as ethical concerns, biases, and meeting industry standards. An illustrative quote in this dimension suggests that "Organizations would benefit from leadership training programs that focus on raising awareness of and build moral efficacy and courage, as the exercise of authority and power always entails ethical challenges."

Academic recommendations (LB). I generated 6 aggregate dimensions representing the recommendations from the academic literature on leader(ship) behavior (see Appendix C for additional evidence for the following dimensions). *Increase self-awareness* refers to a collection of recommendations that focus on leaders' selves and how they can use introspection to reflect on and potentially change their tendencies. For instance, one recommendation that fell under this dimension suggests that:

> …given managers' ability to improve their performance through self awareness(e.g., Church, 1997), increasing managers' awareness to their personal values and to the implications of their values, through leadership development programs, can help managers adjust their behavior to suit their intended effects.

Increase knowledge captures a set of recommendations that focus on teaching and learning how (leader) behaviors impact others and how contextual factors influence others' perceptions of behaviors. Illustrative of this dimension is the recommendation that "…it is critical for leaders to understand that their emotional displays are viewed, interpreted, and responded to through a variety of filters, one of which is leadership style." *Match behavior to outcome* refers to the idea that specific leader behaviors should be adopted to meet specific desired outcomes. For instance, one recommendation under this dimension suggests that leaders "explicitly discuss work related practices and policies to enhance citizenship behaviors."

Match behavior to context is distinct from the former dimension because it refers to the idea that behaviors should be actively adjusted ("flexed") depending on aspects of the context and the audience. For instance, one recommendation states that "managers may need to also be aware of their followers' cultural values and to engage in behaviors that match their followers' values." *Create environmental alignment* is a collection of recommendations that focus on how organizations can and should support (or inhibit) particular leader behaviors. A simple recommendation under this dimension reads "organizations should seek to reduce abusive supervision in the workplace to the greatest extent possible." Lastly, *train and enact consistent behaviors* refers to a broad set of recommendations that all suggest leaders should use a certain type of behavior or style consistently. An illustrative recommendation suggests that "organizations could implement leadership training programs that focus on improving managers' interpersonal communication skills and strengthening their capability for articulating work expectations appropriately." Because of the lack of reference to change or context, the implication is that these behaviors/styles should be used across situations.

Practitioner claims. I generated 5 aggregate dimensions representing the claims practitioner organizations made about their LDPs and the outcomes they create (see Appendix C for additional evidence for the following dimensions). *Creating the "enlightened" leader* was an outcome claim that represents a collection of characteristics that make up what Rhee and Honeycutt-Sigler (2010: 163-164) called "enlightened leadership": "leaders who are self-aware, learning centered, adaptable, interpersonally competent, and team oriented." These are individuals who, having transformed themselves, are supposedly flexible, skilled with people, and capable of a broad set of idealized forms of leadership. Illustrative of this dimension is the claim that a program will help "[Develop] the courage in your future leaders to show up as their best selves, to stay open to learning, and to drive and lead change." *Creating practical outcomes* references claims about performance-based outcomes that organizations care about, regardless of whether those outcomes are definitionally related to leadership as a social influence process. For example, one claim states that "Leadership development drives breakthrough results." *Creating strategic leaders* captures the idea of turning participants into more capable high-level leaders, through an emphasis on how to be change-oriented and how to broaden their contributions to the organization.

The dimension, *Can help any organization,* refers to the idea that the LDP in question has broad applicability and could be used by almost any organization for a variety of purposes. Illustrative of this dimension is one website claim that notes: "Our proven leadership and management learning journeys can be integrated into a wide range of contexts from mergers and acquisitions to initiatives driving cultural change to supporting new ways of working." Lastly, *Creates real organizational impact* captures the idea that the programs are trustworthy and relevant for client organizations. An example of this dimension is the claim that: "Our development programs combine immersive learning, cross-industry dialog, peer exchanges, and discussions with subject matter experts to provide more relevant and impactful experiences for your leaders."

Convergences. There are a few convergences between the academic recommendations and practitioner claims (see Table 14 and Figure 8). First, the LB literature's *match behavior to context* recommendation aligns well with the practitioner second-order theme of *encouraging flexibility*. Both reflect the idea of teaching behavioral flexibility, the ability to adjust one's behaviors for different contexts.

Second, the LD literature and practitioner corpus align on the idea of programs being relevant and experiential. These ideas are represented in three aggregate dimensions: *Include experiential learning* (LD), *use various development strategies* (LD) and *creates real organizational impact* (P). The practitioner second-order themes sometimes directly align with academic LD recommendations (e.g., programs include experiential learning, participants' progress is measurable). Further, some practitioner claims focused on the idea of being research-backed, a claim that aligns with the implicit recommendation of most academic articles in both the LD and LB literatures.

Third, all three sources aligned on the notion of evaluating program success. These ideas were present in three aggregate dimensions: *Evaluate and follow-up* (LD), *create environmental alignment* (LB), and *creates real organizational impact* (P). The idea of being "data-driven" is popular in academics and in practice, which may partly explain the emphasis on evaluation. This emphasis suggests that each domain sees evaluation as important, though notably some have critiqued how evaluation is practiced in reality (Leroy et al., 2022).

Fourth, all three sources shared an emphasis on the self. The LD literature recommendation on *emphasizing participant agency* and the LB literature recommendations on *increasing self-awareness* and *increasing knowledge* relate to the practitioner aggregate dimension of *creating the enlightened leader*. The recommendations and related claim all represent a focus on the individual participant and, specifically, how individuals can grow and change as people in an LDP. That all three sources align on this "self-focus" suggests that we are likely to continue to see LDPs focus on individual agency and transformation, potentially at the cost of more collective modes of thinking (Ferry & Guthey, 2020).

Divergences. I identified four primary differences between the academic recommendations and practitioner claims (see Table 14 and Figure 8). First, the two academic literatures included reference to the importance of organizational support and alignment. This idea is represented by two aggregate dimensions: *Context that supports development* (LD) and *creating environmental alignment* (LB). In contrast, the practitioner source did not include a reference to participants' organizational context. This lack of attention to context is likely a product of the fact that the practitioner organizations cannot control what happens at participants' home organization; they are necessarily limited to working with one person or, at most, a team of people from the home organization.

Second, practitioner claims were relatively more focused on bottom-line outcomes, reflected in the claim dimension: *creating practical outcomes*. Although the academic literature did sometimes speak to bottom-line outcomes, they were not as directly addressed. Further, whereas the LD literature included a dimension I called *broaden development content*, there were far fewer references to addressing biases and ethical issues in the practitioner sources. That said, there were some practitioner claims related to ethics in references to idealized leadership, but they were often bundled with a collection of other positive characteristics and behaviors (e.g., acting ethically was bundled with inspiring people, leading teams, etc.).

Third, the LB literature included two ideas not represented in the practitioner sources: the idea of *matching behaviors to outcomes* and of *training and enacting consistent behaviors*. These two dimensions reflect a tendency in parts of the LB literature to focus on a particular behavior or set of behaviors and match them with specific outcomes. The practitioner sources were more likely to include a broad set of characteristics and behaviors (e.g., *the enlightened leader*, *strategic leaders*) and avoid specifics.

Lastly, some practitioner claims focused on the idea of strategic leaders (*creating strategic leaders*) and programs that were broadly applicable to client needs (*can help any organization*). The reference to strategic leaders was defined by an emphasis on broadening a person's impact within an organization and helping them become more business-knowledgeable and change-oriented. The academic literature did not have a clear recommendation that aligned with this focus. Likewise, academic recommendations did not include reference to making programs flexible enough that they could be applied widely.

Figure 8 and Table 15 summarize comparisons across these three domains in different formats. In the next and final chapter, I discuss some implications of these findings for the science and practice of leadership development.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this dissertation I conducted two studies. In study 1, I asked how a leadership development program can function against the backdrop of leadership's conceptual ambiguity. Based on an inductive, qualitative case study, I proposed a theoretical explanation rooted in Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity. Specifically, I drew on my data and the literature to propose that, rather than being solely harmful, leadership's conceptual ambiguity can be strategically maintained by an organization to expand its pool of customers, to expand the quantity and type of content it delivers, and to decrease the chance of disruptive conflict occurring in programs.

One of the implications of the explanation I derived from study 1 is that there may be a tension between the goals of science and practice in the context of LD. For many leadership researchers—and social scientists more broadly—construct clarity is a key goal (Carton, 2022; Suddaby, 2010). Yet study 1 suggests that there may be strategic reasons for practitioners to maintain leadership's ambiguity. In study 2, I took a first step towards addressing this possibility. I gathered academic recommendations from the practical implications sections of leader behavior and leadership development articles along with practitioner claims drawn from publicly available company websites. I used Gioia et al.'s (2013) inductive qualitative analysis to generate aggregate dimensions representing what these different sources of data were recommending or claiming in regard to LDPs.

In this closing chapter, I discuss the implications of my two studies in isolation and in general, ideas for future research directions, and limitations of my methodological approaches.

Study 1 Discussion

In study 1 I generated an explanation for how an LDP can function given leadership's conceptual ambiguity. I based my explanation on the concept of strategic ambiguity, which Eisenberg (1984) coined in reference to the speech acts of people in positions of power (e.g., statements, press releases, speeches). Although the concept can be extended to the speech acts of other people (Jarzabkowksi et al. 2010), Eisenberg's (1984) original notion was that powerful figures often benefited by injecting a degree of ambiguity into their statements. In doing so, they could create what Eisenberg (1984) called unified diversity amongst listeners. Unified diversity means that different groups of listeners interpret the same statement in different ways and, because of those differences, all support the same speaker.

Thus, the concept of strategic ambiguity originated in strategic communication research and primarily focused on speech acts. In study 1, I draw on strategic ambiguity to explain how the ambiguity of a concept (i.e., leadership), rather than a speech act, can create functional outcomes for an organization, rather than a single speaker. In doing so, I drew inspiration from related areas of study where researchers have similarly found value in examining the strategic nature of ambiguous concepts (c.f., Leitch & Davenport, 2007 on sustainability). My work provides a theoretical language to understand how and why the ambiguity of leadership might be maintained. Thus, I extend the concept of strategic ambiguity and invite future theoretical and empirical work in the leadership-management literature to employ it.

I also highlight three ways that strategic ambiguity functions in the context of my first study. Specifically, I argued that maintaining the ambiguity of leadership 1) expands the firm's pool of customers, 2) expands the firm's content, and 3) decreases the likelihood of disruptive disagreement in programs. Although some specifics may be unique to my study context, the underlying theoretical connection may transfer. That is, the theoretical connection between strategic ambiguity and unified diversity can be used to explain my specific case and perhaps others. I propose that points one and two above expand the *diversity* of the firms' stakeholders and point three maintains *unity* within that diversity. Thus, strategic ambiguity creates unified diversity, just as Eisenberg (1984) proposed in his original work. My research suggests that this basic proposition can hold even when the context fundamentally changes: from the speech acts of an individual to the meanings applied to leadership by an organization. Further, I provide specific pathways through which this proposition "works."

My research also contributes to the strategic ambiguity concept by warning of possible negative side-effects of maintaining ambiguity. Although I suggest that unified diversity is likely to aid some organizational goals, I also suggest that it can create harmful effects. Specifically, if all or almost all meanings of leadership are considered valid, then it makes it harder for the organization to push back on the dominance of masculine meanings. Masculine meanings are often associated with leadership, and this can be detrimental to all people—men included—when feminine meanings are not also acknowledged as equally valuable and "leader-like"(Gooty et al., 2023; Johnson & Lacerenza, 2013). If masculine meanings are more commonly applied to leadership in society writ large, then we would expect to hear them voiced in many LDPs. If we cannot push back on the dominance of those meanings, then it is difficult to create a fully inclusive space because other meanings will not have equal "air time."

As an example of the possibility for negative side-effects, consider the following exchange I had with Margo:

> **Andrew**: Do you ever say 'no' [laughs] right? Do you ever tell someone that, no that's not a good definition of leadership or that's not a good understanding?
>
> **Margo**: Well I think that, I mean sometimes [sigh] you know it's, no I don't often say no. I may say 'does anyone else have a different point of view?'…So I think um, but that's

> not, they're not wrong right? Who's to say that that's wrong. That's not wrong, it's just different and so I think it's, it's expanding our perspective of what it is. Yeah.

Here, the *expansion of perspectives* (diversity) may keep the peace (unity), but it risks allowing some meanings to dominate because "no" is rarely seen as an appropriate answer. I saw this in action in my observations. Early in Day 4 the group was asked to share some of the things they associated with leadership:

> **Linda**: Mmm a leader takes on more of a proactive role rather than reactive. That's right. What else?
>
> **Robert**: I think a leader is more visionary. He's more forward thinking.
>
> **Linda**: Mmhmm right, more visionary. There's a famous saying that leadership is about being able to set the road ahead, being forward thinking….

Robert uses "he," a surface-level example of gendering leadership. Based on my time spent with Robert, I strongly suspect this was unintentional and that, if it was addressed, Robert would both recognize the problem and apologize. But the slip-up was not addressed; I argue that part of the reason for not addressing this is the general aversion Capacity showed to denying meanings of leadership. As I suggested, this can be strategic for certain ends. But it can also create problems, such as the maintenance of dominant meanings via an unwillingness to address them. Again turning to Akinola and colleagues' (2024: 8) study, my proposal here aligns with their warning that "while widening the definition [of diversity] may facilitate inclusion, doing so can contribute to institutionalized inequalities." Broadening the meaning of terms such as leadership and diversity, often done in the name of inclusivity, can paradoxically create non-inclusive spaces by failing to address underlying inequalities. We should thus always ask, strategic towards what (and whose) ends?

Study 2 Discussion

In study 2 I identified aggregate dimensions from three sources of data: recommendations in the practical implications sections of leader behavior articles, recommendations in the practical implications sections of leadership development articles, and claims about LDPs on practitioner organization websites. Here, I interpret some of the important convergences and divergences amongst these recommendations and claims.

Academic recommendations and practitioner claims appear to align when they discuss individuals, when they discuss flexibility, and when they discuss certain components of what makes a program rigorous. Both academic recommendations and practitioner claims feature references to individual agency, introspection, and transformation. This might reflect a wider cultural phenomenon in the United States where there has been an increased focus on personal "brands" and self-development (Gorbatov et al., 2021; Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2013). If both academics and practitioners are influenced by—and in turn influence—these cultural developments, it may explain why there is a similar level of focus on transforming the individual.

The idea of flexibility and adaptability was also represented in both sources. Although the academic sources featured these ideas less prominently, the notion of *matching behavior to context* was well-represented. This makes sense given that contingency theories of leadership, in various forms, have been present in the literature since at least 1967 (House & Aditya, 1997). In addition, any academic study that uses a leader behavior as a predictor and includes a moderating variable is implying that context matters because the moderating variable is theorized to change the relationship in some way. The overlap between academic recommendations and practitioner claims when it comes to highlighting the importance of context and flexibility may represent an aversion to claiming that one thing (i.e., one behavior) *always* works. However, as I note below, the academic LB literature does have a strong emphasis on specific behaviors or styles and their relation to certain outcomes.

Third, there is an overlap in what academics recommend programs do and what programs claim to do in terms of rigor. Experiential learning, research-backing, and evaluation were themes in both sources. One could argue that practitioner claims are surface-level, and this may be true (Leroy et al., 2022). However, the alignment here suggests that practitioners are at least adopting the “logics” (Lounsbury et al., 2021) of research and evaluation. Based on their claims, practitioners do not, for instance, discount the idea of measuring progress or using science. Instead, they are actively wielding these ideas to persuade customers, which implies that they see these logics as fairly popular and widespread among their potential clients.

Divergences center on the relative focus on contextual factors, relative focus on behavioral specificity, and relative focus on “business” knowledge. As noted above, the relative absence of organizational context in practitioner claims is likely a result of not being able to affect those factors. This limiting factor may explain why practitioner claims did not mention organizational context in the way that the academic literature did (see Figure 8 and Table 14).

Although I suggested above that practitioners might be adopting research logics when it came to claims about the rigor of programs, they appear to draw on different logics at other times. The relatively greater emphasis on practical (i.e., financial) outcomes is expected and reflects the primary end goal of these programs. These outcomes (e.g., delegating, providing networking opportunities) were sometimes not clearly related to the definition of leadership as a social influence process.

Further, the practitioner claims did not contain nearly as much emphasis on specific behaviors and outcomes as the academic LB literature did. This is expected, but still illustrates an important difference. Firms specializing in LDPs may have incentives *not* to focus on specific behaviors, because this could threaten the broad applicability of their programs. Clients would have to be convinced that this one set of behaviors suits their needs, which may be a harder "sell" as compared to making claims about wide sets of capabilities (e.g., the enlightened leader, strategic leaders). Thus, whereas the academic LB literature sometimes focused on specific behaviors, this may be counter to practitioner goals.

General Discussion

In studies 1 and 2, I employed inductive approaches with qualitative data given the novelty of the questions I asked (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Thus, my goal was not to test an existing theory but rather to build and/or extend theory. Together, my findings have implications for research on leadership development and leadership more broadly.

Leadership development. In a recent article on leadership development written by a collection of experts in the field, Leroy et al. (2022: 13) noted that LDPs invoke leadership to mean almost anything. They wrote:

> Considering the romantic preference for anything labeled "leadership" (Kniffin et al., 2020), people typically include a lot of different interventions in their school under the nomenclature of leadership (i.e., good strategic thinking, business impact, or team building). As a result of this, the word "leadership" has become a container that serves as a symbol of anything that seems impactful but, ironically, that ambiguity makes it hard to determine the impact of those developmental efforts… When everything is labeled as "leadership," the concept loses meaning and/or gets muddied, undermining our ability to provide quality development" (Leroy et al. 2022: 13)

Although the focus of Leroy et al.'s (2022) arguments were business school LDPs, I suggest they hold in corporate and non-profit contexts too. Specifically, these authors identified the ambiguity often attached to leadership and to its development, and they make the case that ambiguity undermines the development process.

In a related article, Vongswasdi et al. (2023) identified different perspectives that stakeholders hold regarding the purpose of leadership development. The authors noted a lack of agreement even within an organization regarding the purpose of development. The four perspectives they identified were the "empiricist," who believes LDPs should result in measurable and concrete behavioral changes, the "believer," who sees LDPs as a site for idiosyncratic and holistic personal transformation, the "cynic," who believes LDPs are primarily a marketing and reputation-building tool, and the "pragmatist," who believes LDPs serve broader organizational goals such as helping people develop networks and aligning cultural values.

Like Leroy et al. (2022) and Vongswasdi et al. (2023), my dissertation highlights the ambiguity of leadership as an important factor in the leadership development process. I go further by focusing specifically on this ambiguity and generating research questions based on it. In addition, my research makes the case that LDPs are a context in which the ambiguity of leadership—and not just of its development (Vongswadi et al., 2023)—is particularly relevant. It is in these programs that people are tasked with *becoming* leaders and *enacting* leadership. Thus, an organization (corporate, educational, or otherwise) that engages in leadership development must, directly or indirectly, deal with the ambiguous nature of leadership as a concept. Despite the significant advances LD research has made in the last few years, this has not been widely recognized (c.f. no mention of ambiguity in Day et al., 2021; Day et al., 2014; Eva et al., 2021; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Leroy et al., 2022; Wallace et al., 2021). Part of the reason that leadership's ambiguity is absent from the literature may be due to the general lack of attention to context in leadership studies (Johns, 2024). My first contribution to the LD literature then, is to highlight the ambiguity of leadership as both an important contextual factor and a topic worthy of attention.

My second contribution to the LD literature is to complicate Leroy et al.'s (2022) suggestion that quality development requires a more precise conceptualization of leadership. By complicate, I do not mean that I disagree: Leroy et al. (2022) are making their case on the basis of good research principles and I broadly align with their perspective. Instead, I complicate their (and my own) perspective through an engagement with an empirical case and with theoretical perspectives outside of LD. As a result of this engagement, I proposed in study 1 that there are organizational incentives to maintain, rather than restrict, the ambiguity of leadership. Further, in study 2, I identified areas where academic recommendations and practitioner claims appear to reference the concept of leadership in different ways. As such, my work offers at least two complicating factors to Leroy et al.'s (2022) suggestions that, together, will hopefully spur renewed thought and debate in the theory and practice of LD.

First, my work suggests that maintaining ambiguity around leadership may offer direct benefits to LDP participants. My theoretical explanation suggests that by maintaining this ambiguity, an organization can justify expanding the content that a program covers. In other words, an LDP can include a wide variety of topics and discussions if the meaning of leadership is similarly broad. In my findings, I gave one example of how this can help participants. Specifically, participants were able to bring up any problems they are currently facing, even if those problems are not obviously related to leadership. Catherine, for instance, was able to discuss the problem she was having with her peer; this seemed to be Catherine's most salient concern, yet it is not obvious that it was a leadership problem. Thus, the expansion of content in the program—aided by maintaining ambiguity around what leadership is (and isn't)—created a "holding space" for participants to talk about what was on their mind (Petriglieri, 2011). Further, one could argue that this expansion subsequently helps "real" leadership development because learning in one domain (earning respect from peers) can translate to another (earning respect from subordinates). This logic aligns with Akinola et al.'s (2024: 8) argument that, in the context of diversity training, "broadening the definition of diversity can give latitude for any personally relevant issues to be discussed."

Second, my research identifies the existence of what Leroy et al. (2022: 15) called a "competing incentive" when it comes to a precise conceptualization of leadership. They and others have noted that academic institutions may be incentivized to avoid evidence-based development practices because those practices could reveal flaws and generate backlash (Vongswasdi et al., 2023). My research further proposes that an LDP may be incentivized to maintain imprecision because this imprecision generates functional outcomes. Taken together, Leroy et al.'s (2022) argument and my research helps us identify two related and specific examples of strategically *avoiding* evidence-based practices: strategic ignorance and strategic ambiguity.

Although not invoked directly by Leroy et al. (2022) or Vongswasdi et al. (2023), their discussions align well with what McGoey (2012: 555) called strategic ignorance: "practices of obfuscation and deliberate insulation from unsettling information," which can allow "individuals and institutions to command resources, deny liability in the aftermath of crises, and to assert expertise in the face of unpredictable outcomes" (McGoey, 2012: 553). Like strategic ambiguity, strategic ignorance is a concept that challenges commonly held assumptions that people—especially experts—strive for knowledge. Instead, people sometimes benefit from actively avoiding certain kinds of information. In the case of LDPs, one clear example is outcomes: To assess outcomes is potentially dangerous because the outcomes have the chance to reveal failure (Leroy et al., 2022: 15; Vongswasdi et al., 2023: 2). Insulating oneself—maintaining ignorance—is thus sometimes the safer option (see also Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Essén et al., 2022).

Likewise, my dissertation suggests that in LDPs, *clarity* can be dangerous. Clarity leaves one open to critique (e.g., that one's definition of leadership is wrong or bad) and risks alienating potential clients (e.g., by clarifying who you *do not* serve). In study 2, one of the aggregate dimensions I identified in the practitioner claims corpus was the idea of being able to *help any organization*. It might be the case that a lack of clarity helps practitioner organizations make this claim. Thus, maintaining ambiguity around leadership is sometimes the safest option.

Together, the theoretical concepts of strategic ignorance and strategic ambiguity help us name and understand some of the incentives *against* evidence-based leadership development practices (Leroy et al., 2022; Vongswasdi et al., 2023). If we do not name these incentives and study them to understand how and why they can create functional outcomes for organizations, we risk creating ignorance and ambiguity in our own research. My research contributes to the field by providing a name and theoretical explanation for some of the more deep-seated incentives against evidence-based leadership development that exist in our field and in practice.

Leadership. Like leadership development research, the broader leadership literature does not regularly address the ambiguous meanings applied to leadership. By this I mean that the field is not systematically paying attention to ambiguity: we would not expect to see "ambiguity of leadership" as a keyword phrase in *The Leadership Quarterly*, for instance. There are, however, occasional discussions of ambiguity in individual articles (e.g., Alvesson, 1996; Harding et al., 2011; Kelly, 2014), suggesting that some researchers have noted the issue and identified its importance. These works have been valuable, but they have not focused on *how* the ambiguity of leadership impacts certain people, processes, or outcomes. My research takes inspiration from these and other arguments and foregrounds the ambiguity of leadership as an important contextual feature (Johns, 2024). For instance, I referenced Kelly's (2014) philosophical work outlining a "negative ontology" of leadership. Kelly (2014) used the term "empty signifier" to describe leadership as a concept that can stand in for all manner of other (usually good) things. Kelly's (2014) work thus aligns closely with Leroy et al.'s (2022: 13) suggestion that "the word 'leadership' has become a container that serves as a symbol of anything that seems impactful."

My first study extends Kelly's (2014) philosophical article by asking and (tentatively) answering *who* benefits from leadership's ambiguity and *why*. To do so, I drew on strategic ambiguity which, unlike empty signifier, allowed me to explain why leadership is invoked in often vague ways, and why that usage might serve certain goals. Further, my case study allowed me to propose novel pathways by which ambiguity can create those functional outcomes. In other words, I was able to propose an answer for why ambiguity is beneficial by drawing on a particular case.

Finally, my work contributes to leadership research by highlighting the benefits of considering macro-contextual features—like the "semantic aura" of leadership (Learmonth & Morrell, 2021)—when studying traditionally micro topics (e.g., leadership development). Although multi-level theory (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999) is not new in leadership and management research, it is rare for leadership research to consider the "discourse" of leadership as a relevant higher-level factor. My research questions were possible only by taking societal discourse (i.e., context; Johns, 2024) into account. I encourage future work to consider this context when forming research questions and hypotheses.

Future Research Directions

I discuss two types of future research directions based on my dissertation. The first involves testing some of the ideas I generated. The second involves reflection on how the ambiguity of leadership might relate to academics as well as practitioners.

Testing explanations. One direction for future research is to adopt a deductive design and test the idea that maintaining ambiguity around leadership is predictive of certain metrics of organizational performance. My research would propose, for instance, that an increase in vague language surrounding leadership in LDPs would predict outcomes like the number of clients/participants a firm has (holding firm size constant) and participant satisfaction with programs (a proxy of low conflict).

To study this, researchers could leverage firm data along with linguistic measures of vague language use. One measure from linguistics is the type-token ratio (TTR) which looks at the number of unique words in a “text” compared to its total number of words (Cunningham & Haley, 2020; Hess et al. 1984). A high TTR indicates a large amount of unique words, which researchers have suggested shows relatively lower clarity and precision (Colwell et al 2002; Parhankangas & Renko, 2017). In contrast, a low TTR has been interpreted to indicate increased precision and concreteness (Colwell et al. 2002; Parhankangas & Renko, 2017).

In an ideal world, researchers could assess leadership-relevant language (e.g., “leadership is…; leaders are people who…”) used by program facilitators across an LD firm’s programs and offerings. On that “text,” one could then calculate the type-token ratio. Given the challenges involved in collecting that amount of data, a more plausible alternative would be to assess the TTR of a firm’s advertising of their LDPs, similar to the data I gathered for study 2. However, doing so would necessitate assuming that advertising has a fairly strong relation to actual practices.

Researchers could also leverage other designs to test the ideas proposed here. For instance, one could set up an experiment manipulating the ambiguity of leadership language and assessing outcomes that test the positive (e.g., unity) and negative (maintenance of dominant gendered meanings) functions I theorized. Further qualitative research would be valuable to extend my theoretical arguments and perhaps challenge their applicability across different contexts. For instance, it would be particularly valuable to study LDPs aimed at women and see if a similar level of ambiguity around leadership exists. Whether it does or not, there are unique theoretical questions to answer.

Another area for future work to extend my research concerns leader identities (Epitropaki et al., 2017). A leader identity is a component of one's self as a leader; the meaning and strength of that identity can differ across people (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hammond et al., 2017). Like all identities, people learn about possible meanings to attach to their leader identity in part through discourse (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). That is, the ideas "floating" around a concept in society (i.e., on leaders and leadership) influence the identities people form based on the concept. Thus, the meanings that people are exposed to in society can play a direct role in the meanings they attach to their individual identity (Callero, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

As such, the societal ambiguity of leadership is likely to play a role in the types of leader identities people form. Given the maintenance of ambiguity that I observed in my case study, participants could have formed many different types of leader identities. If many meanings are shared, it is logical to expect that many (different) meanings will be applied to people's identities. One area for future work is to test this idea. In LDPs that maintain more ambiguity around leadership, are participant leader identities more diverse in terms of meaning and/or strength? Conversely, in LDPs that use more precise conceptualizations of leadership, are participant leader identities less diverse in terms of meaning and strength?

The maintenance of ambiguity may also create a condition in which participants feel "free" to add whatever meanings they personally prefer to their leader identities. Given this perceived freedom, LDPs that maintain ambiguity around leadership may promote the formation of leader identities that participants perceive to be authentic (Caza et al., 2018). At the same time, such freedom might create confusion. With few limits on the meaning and strength of one's leader identity, some participants might be confused as to whether they are leaders and/or when they are doing leadership (Collinson, 2006). I encourage future research to consider both of these possible outcomes simultaneously (perceived authenticity; confusion) to provide a holistic picture of how LDPs impact people's leader identities.

Lastly, researchers might consider the impact that strategically ambiguous LDPs have on implicit leadership theories (ILTs): "cognitive structures thought to guide processing of leader characteristics and facilitate inferences about likely behaviors and outcomes" (Lord et al., 2020: 50). Just as popular social ideas impact identities (Markus & Nurius, 1986), social thought influences people's perceptions about the characteristics leaders have and the behaviors they engage in (Lord et al., 2020). Thus, if social thought on leadership is dominated by gendered and raced expectations (Gooty et al., 2023; Petsko & Rosette, 2023), then many people's ILTs are likely to be similarly gendered and raced.

Some of those people will go on to participate in LDPs, where their implicit theories can either be reinforced, maintained, or challenged. As a result of my research, I speculated that maintaining ambiguity around leadership in LDPs is likely to contribute to the maintenance of gendered and raced ILTs. When ideas are not challenged, dominant ideas will remain dominant because there is no force moving them to change. Thus, if all meanings are framed as valid, dominant ILTs are likely to be reproduced.

Future research could work off this speculation and build and test a theoretical model. For instance, research could test how the level of ambiguity in LDPs affects participants' espoused meanings of leadership. My work would suggest that a greater level of ambiguity in LDPs reduces the likelihood that participants will challenge raced/gendered conceptualizations of leadership. In this case, a *lack* of change (from pre- and post-program participation) would indicate that an LDP is perpetuating dominant meanings of leadership by failing to challenge them.

The role of ambiguity in the leadership academic literature. In addition to testing the theoretical ideas I proposed, another direction for future work is to reflect on the possibility that we—the people who research and practice leadership development—collectively benefit from leadership's ambiguity. That is, despite the fact that enhancing clarity is a *stated goal* of much of management research (Suddaby, 2010), leadership researchers might nonetheless benefit from the concept's ambiguity. This idea is not entirely novel; Alvesson (2020) for instance suggested that academic reward structures provide a number of benefits to leadership researchers who develop new constructs (e.g., publications, attention, status, grants etc.). I go further by outlining potential identity and material benefits that academics and practitioners involved in leadership might be gaining due in part to the ambiguity of leadership.

Identity benefits. Identity research suggests that in general, people are motivated to claim and maintain a positive sense of self (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Dutton et al., 2010). We desire, for instance, to see ourselves as "competent, capable, accepted, and valued by others" (Dutton et al. 2010: 270). Our work—what we do—plays an important role in our ability to create or maintain these positive views (Petriglieri et al. 2019).

If one's work is *leadership*, this likely facilitates self-enhancement because of the positive cultural meanings attached to leadership (e.g., Alvesson, 2020, DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Learmonth & Morrell, 2021). Leadership, especially when compared to labels like manager or administrator, "offers identity, status, and legitimation support through promises of moral goodness and grandiose action" (Alvesson, 2020: 2).

I suggest the same application of positive meanings might occur for people whose role is to *study* and/or *develop* leadership. In other words, leadership researchers (myself included) and leadership development practitioners benefit from the positive aura of leadership. Following Alvesson's (2020) logic above, it is more positive (valuable, laudable, etc.) to study and develop leaders and leadership than it is to study and develop managers, administrators, or bosses. If leadership is seen as good for individuals, organizations, and even societies, then the roles of studying or developing this positive force should likewise be seen as highly valuable. Because the value of our work roles impacts our ability to maintain a positive sense of self, it is logical to say that we gain identity benefits from leadership's connection to moral goodness (Alvesson, 2020; Leroy et al. 2022).

But what about ambiguity? What identity benefits could result from leadership being an *ambiguous* concept? Here, I encourage reflection on the ways that different types of academic or practitioner identities are made possible and valuable by the space created from leadership's ambiguity. I discuss three here: The *guru*, the *empiricist*, and the *critic*. These are not exhaustive or exclusive, nor am I suggesting they apply perfectly to individuals. Instead, I introduce them as "ideal types," a term that originated with Max Weber:

> An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one of more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (Weber, 1904: 90, quoted in Morgan, 2006).

Thus, each of the three identities I introduce are amalgamations (Cutcher et al. 2020) of elements that I have identified in my data and/or in existing literature.

The *guru* is a leadership academic/practitioner identity in which we view ourselves as having expert knowledge on a complex, important, difficult to understand phenomenon. It might involve laying claim to a particular type of leadership or method of development, or it might involve claiming vast knowledge of the leadership domain. This type of identity is made more valuable by leadership's ambiguity. Being an expert on something (e.g., applied physics, aerospace engineering) confers identity benefits, but the benefits are greater when the "something" in question is thought to be complex. Consider the colloquialism, "it's not rocket science," which implies that rocket science is a complex field in which expertise is highly impressive. We could imagine that a rocket scientist at a cocktail party would reap identity benefits from telling people their profession. In contrast, expertise in domains that people consider to be less impressive would not as easily confer identity benefits. I apply that idea to leadership: The more ambiguous that leadership is, the harder it seems to be to understand. The harder it is to understand, the more impressive it is to view oneself as a guru on the subject. For some, this might make it an appealing identity to claim. But others may be unwilling to claim "guru-status" precisely because the identity is impressive (c.f. Ajay et al. 2024; Cunningham et al. 2022).

The *empiricist* is a leadership academic/practitioner identity in which we view ourselves as unbiased, objective thinkers who apply positivist standards of science to reach unambiguously true conclusions. The empiricist identity benefits from the ambiguity of leadership because ambiguity creates a "mess" for the empiricist to "clean up." From the empiricist perspective, ambiguity indicates incomplete or inaccurate knowledge. Leadership's ambiguity thus creates an opportunity for the empiricist identity to be asserted; From this perspective the field and/or practice of leadership is broken and requires fixing. To be the one doing the fixing is then a positive identity to claim.

The *critic* is a leadership academic/practitioner identity in which we view ourselves as skeptics outside of the mainstream leadership landscape. The critic sees leadership as a trend, a buzzword that has picked up steam and taken over academia and practice. The critic benefits from the ambiguity of leadership because it contributes to a wide range of relatively easy targets. If leadership is used broadly and with little clarity, the critic can easily assert themselves while simultaneously staying outside of the mainstream. The critic identity paradoxically draws on and rejects leadership, reaping the benefits of a popular term while maintaining distance from it.

All three identity "types" benefit from the ambiguity of leadership in different ways. The *guru* benefits from ambiguity because understanding a complex phenomenon is viewed as impressive. The *empiricist* benefits from ambiguity because it creates the exact type of problem that they claim to have solutions for. And the *critic* benefits from ambiguity because it creates a wide range of fairly easy targets for provocative critique.

Further, each of the three groups benefits from the others' existence in an almost cyclical pattern. The guru is the most likely of the three to create a novel leadership perspective; they are less concerned with the exact boundaries of what counts as leadership and are more interested in spurring new thought and practice. This creates the conditions for the empiricist and the critic to thrive. The empiricist can assert an alternative that is grounded in their view of science, claiming that the guru's work is too messy and ultimately not conducive to scientific progress. The critic can then critique both the guru and the empiricist: The former for contributing to the fashionability of leadership and the latter for failing to fundamentally question the idea of leadership itself. The guru benefits because the other groups increase attention and volume in the leadership domain, thereby ironically making leadership an even more important concept. Thus, all three groups can assert their preferred identities and reap benefits within the broad and ambiguous umbrella of leadership.

Material benefits. So far I have discussed potential identity benefits of working with leadership. Here I bring up the possibility that we—leadership academics and practitioners—also materially benefit from leadership's ambiguity. I base this on the idea that both academics and practitioners are rewarded for *developing a niche* in the leadership domain. I suggest that the ability to carve out a niche, whether of study or practice, is made easier by the ambiguity of leadership. The more ambiguous the term, the more space available to do something new.

For academics, the need to develop a niche has arguably never been greater. As management researchers, we are pushed to do novel research because our highest rated journals emphasize novelty as a key criteria of publishability (Davis, 2015; Tourish, 2020). This need starts early: Students on the job market need to explain how their areas of research cohere but also how they combine to make them a unique applicant distinct from anyone else.

The ambiguity of leadership might make these tasks easier: Developing a niche is easier when the overarching concept is broad and lacks clear boundaries. Job applicants might find it easier to explain what is unique about their approach to leadership as compared to applicants specializing in more clearly defined domains. One might develop a new term or new perspective on leadership that still fits under the broad leadership umbrella (Alvesson, 2020). In doing so, the researcher can benefit from the status and popularity of leadership while still doing something novel. Alternatively, one might critique this very expansion, resulting in publications that provide a fix and/or a provocation. Overall, because of leadership's ambiguity, it is an area of research that is fertile area for both novel development and provocative critique, both of which can increase one's chances of getting a high impact publication.

For practitioner organizations, the push to develop a niche is similarly strong. In a market-based economy, LD organizations have to compete with other organizations for clients. Resource-based theory (Barney, 1991) helps clarify why developing a niche in the LD space is so important for firm survival and growth. Resource-based theory sees organizations as "bundles of resources and capabilities" (Barney et al., 2021: 1939). Resources are broadly defined and could include things like human resource management practices, organizational culture, and knowledge. The core ideas of resource-based theory are that a) resources can contribute to competitive advantage when they are valuable and rare and b) resources can contribute to *sustained* competitive advantage when they are also difficult to imitate and substitute for (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2021; Markman et al., 2004).

In the context of organizations who offer LDPs, one "resource" is their approach to leadership. Consider, for instance, claims like the following three from my study 2 data:

> At [firm A] we have a *unique approach* to leadership. We don't see it as a person or as a position. We see leadership as a special and vital action. (Firm A)
>
> Our *unique approach* to leadership development combines powerful content based on decades of research and development, expert consultants and facilitators, and innovative technology that supports and reinforces lasting behavior change. (Firm B)
>
> [Firm C] Develops Leaders *Differently*: We base our approach to development on 50 years of science and research on the practice of leadership. (Firm C)

An approach to leadership is an important resource in the industry because without an approach that is in some way unique, there is little value in the organization existing at all. For instance, how would you create an LD firm with no approach to leadership? Or one that simply copies an existing approach? The former seems impossible (what would you market?) and the latter might result in legal action. My point here is that the more ambiguous leadership is, the *easier it is to develop a niche* within the LD market. There are simply more options available because the umbrella term (leadership) is broad and not clearly defined.

My reasoning suggests that leadership academics and practitioners are in a similar position: Both groups gain material benefits from carving out a niche in the leadership domain. And the creation of a niche may be easier because of the ambiguity of leadership. Even the academics who critique that very ambiguity (or who write a dissertation on it) are benefiting from it because it created the conditions necessary for the critique.

Does our science and practice benefit from unified diversity? The second implication I develop here is the possibility that the science and practice of leadership (development) exists in a state of unified diversity. In other words, leadership's ambiguity may be functional (strategic) for both academic and practitioner goals.

Academics and practitioners use the same word (leadership) but at times appear to mean very different things. This is illustrated by data from study 1 and study 2. In general, practitioners seem to use leadership to refer to a broader set of things (e.g., enhanced business knowledge, communication skills, strong performer) than academics do. Is this harmful? The connotations of the science-practice gap would imply that it is. And recent discussions of evidence-based LD similarly imply that the disconnect is a problem (e.g., Leroy et al. 2022). However, what if we drew on the idea of strategic ambiguity and zoomed out to the science and practice of leadership: Is it possible that the ambiguity of leadership allows us to reap benefits from using the same term in fundamentally different ways?

For leadership academics, the fact that practitioners use the same term implies that our research is applicable and has the potential to be impactful. It shows that we are studying something that is socially relevant, which in turn helps us do things like write funding proposals, motivate journal articles, and communicate with people outside our field. We gain these benefits even if practitioners are using leadership in different ways; The fact that major consulting companies offer *leadership* development—regardless of what is in those programs—suggests that leadership academics are studying something practical.

For practitioners, the fact that academics study leadership lends the concept greater legitimacy. Practitioners can actively use academic models, cite empirical findings, or simply reference the existence of literature on a topic. Even without active use, the existence of the leadership domain in academia confers societal legitimacy on the topic. This legitimacy can help practitioners even if academics use the concept in a different way.

In addition to separately benefiting each group, the ambiguity of leadership may encourage partnerships between academics and practitioners. At first, this seems at odds with the idea of the science-practice gap: It would be logical to think that using the same word to refer to different things discourages partnerships. But if we start from the assumption that academics and practitioners are essentially using leadership for different purposes, then the shared term actually provides the potential for partnership where it would otherwise not exist. A practitioner organization could use leadership to refer to a broad set of self-improvements and still partner with an academic who views leadership more narrowly. The shared term offers the potential for collaboration, and the term (leadership) is only shared because of its ambiguity and capability to be used in multiple ways.

This implication suggests the possibility that academics and practitioners of leadership exist in a state of unified diversity. I introduced the possibility that this unified diversity brings unrecognized benefits to both academics and practitioners. Does this mean we should abandon attempts to bring the science and practice of LD into closer alignment (Leroy et al. 2022)? I would argue no. There is still value in working together to ensure that LD is based on the available evidence and is meaningful for participants and client organizations. Instead, I think the ideas presented here imply that we, as academics, could be more realistic about the limits and utility of our available evidence. Our research is necessarily incomplete, and it cannot help people address every idiosyncratic issue they have at work. Thus, there will always be a place for "practical wisdom" (Bachmann et al. 2018) in the conduct of leadership; LDPs are a unique context that encourage and support people in sharing this wisdom. We—academics and practitioners—might benefit from recognizing the different ways we refer to leadership and simultaneously maintaining dialogue and partnerships. In this way, perhaps we can acknowledge our lack of complete unity but recognize the value of our diverse perspectives.

Limitations

Both of my studies have limitations that researchers should keep in mind and use as opportunities for future work. In study 1, my research context is limited to one organization. Thus, any claims I make beyond that context are in need of further verification. I propose that the underlying theoretical processes at play may transfer beyond my case (Mook, 1983; Tracy, 2013), but this remains a proposition until it is tested. Second, my study 1 interview sample was limited to employees at Capacity; I did not interview program participants. This limits my ability to make claims related to participants' thoughts and feelings. I was able to address this limitation to some degree via my participant observation in a week-long LDP. In that program, I was able to get closer to participants' thoughts and feelings in virtual break-out room sessions and by observing their interactions with facilitators. Still, future research should aim to include program participants in interviews. Third, my interview participants might have differed from other employees at Capacity because they chose to opt-in to the research I was conducting. They may be relatively more engaged in conversations around what leadership is and thus more interested in participating in an interview on that topic. It is possible that other employees at Capacity give less thought to leadership's meaning and perhaps find that to be a less important topic. It would be interesting for future research to explore whether some people working in LD do not concern themselves with what leadership means; Perhaps for some aspects of LD practice, the question is simply not important.

In study 2, practitioner claims are just that, claims; They are not necessarily aligned with practices. Thus, they should be interpreted as what practitioner organizations are claiming to do for their clients and potential LDP participants. I argued above that these claims are important and reflect what practitioner organizations think is desirable and marketable, but nonetheless they should not be confused with actual practices. Second, the academic recommendations and practitioner claims data in study 2 were different in a few ways. The academic data had fairly specific recommendations, usually split into one or two sentences, whereas the practitioner data was more often a collection of different ideas linked together. This makes sense given the distinct formats: academic recommendations were housed in journal articles with relatively clear formats, whereas practitioner claims were housed on websites with less defined formats and requirements. Nonetheless, this represents a limitation to my study because it introduces a potential confound—the nature of the data source—to my comparisons. A third and related limitation was that I used different software tools for coding in study 2. For the academic literature, I used Microsoft Excel to code recommendations given that each data point was fairly distinct in what it was recommending. In other words, it was often easy to code each recommendation as one first-order concept. For the practitioner data, I used the coding software NVivo because this allowed me to more easily code parts of claims into different first-order concepts. Although the different software could conceivably have had an impact on my findings, I suggest it would be minor given that I used the same analysis strategy for all three sources. Further, I interpreted similarities between the sources even if the exact wording of some of my aggregate dimensions were different (e.g., see table 14 for interpreted alignment between distinct aggregate dimension labels).

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I began by identifying a challenge at the core of leadership development: the requirement to develop something that is conceptually ambiguous. In study 1, I used qualitative theory-building methods at a specific organizational context: Capacity, an organization that specializes in leadership development programs. Through my analysis, I generated an explanation for how an LDP can function in light of leadership's ambiguity.

Specifically, I theorize that by maintaining the ambiguity of leadership through specific communication patterns, the people involved in LDPs can expand who their programs can serve, expand the content they can cover, and smooth program functioning.

This explanation has implications for the idea of a science-practice gap (Banks et al., 2016) in leadership development. Specifically, it suggests that there may be a strong incentive for practitioners to avoid certain types of academic recommendations (Leroy et al., 2022). I follow up on that notion in study 2. Here, I used inductive coding following the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013) to identify scientific *recommendations*, taken from practical implications sections in published academic articles, and practitioner *claims*, taken from public-facing websites. I compared recommendations and claims to identify areas of both overlap and divergence.

Together, these studies suggest that the leadership development literature could be enhanced by focusing more systematically on the ambiguity of leadership. This contextual factor (Johns, 2024) has broad implications for how LDPs function. Further, my dissertation highlights the possibility that leadership's ambiguity holds certain advantages for academics and practitioners, which expands on Leroy et al.'s (2022) idea of competing incentives. The ideas here encourage further reflection and research on the ways we collectively discuss leadership and practice leadership development.

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TABLES

Table 1. Academic definitions of leadership

Article	Define or no?	Definition of leadership
Barnard (1938, as cited in Lord et al., 2017: 437)	Yes	"His treatise emphasized cooperative action in which leadership functions defined a purpose or goal for a collective and generated commitment among followers in support of that end."
Stogdill (1974: 259)	No	"There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept"
Smircich & Morgan (1982: 258)	Yes	"Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. Indeed leadership situations may be conceived as those in which there exists an obligation or a perceived right on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others."
Yukl (1989: 253)	Yes and No	"It is neither feasible nor desirable at this point…to resolve the controversy over the appropriate definition of leadership. For the time being, it is better to use the various conceptions of leadership as a source of different perspectives on a complex, multifaceted phenomenon…Leadership is defined broadly in this article to include influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behavior to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influence the culture of an organization. The terms manager and leader will be used interchangeably."

Article	Define or no?	Definition of leadership
Day (2000: 582)	Yes	"Leadership processes are those that generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways."
Antonakis et al. (2004: 5)	Yes	"Most leadership scholars would agree, in principle, that leadership can be defined as the nature of the influencing process—and its resultant outcomes—that occurs between a leader and followers and how this influencing process is explained by the leaders' dispositional characteristics and behaviours, follower perceptions and attributions of the leader, and the context in which the influencing process occurs."
Day & Harrison (2007: 360)	No	"We adopt a different perspective and argue that such criticisms stem from an overly narrow – if not dogmatic – position on the nature of 'leadership science'. We assert the complexity and multidimensionality of the very nature of leadership mitigates the possibility of a simple or unitary definition. Leadership cannot mean only one thing because it can and does take on multiple meanings and appearances, which have evolved over time."
Fairhurst & Connaughton (2014: 8)	No	"We also do not advocate a universal definition of leadership. Following Wittgenstein (1953), leadership qualifies as a ''blurred concept,'' and following Gallie (1956), an essentially contested one. Leadership is thus best conceived as a family resemblance among power and influence-oriented language games whose features are the subject of this review."
Kelly (2014: 906-907)	No	"'leadership' does not signify anything specific or fixed, but instead serves to create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations. As such, it is suggested that 'leadership' as a term has a distinctly ideological rather than ontological character."
Alvesson (2019: 329)	Yes	"Leadership can be defined as a social influencing process based on the convergence and alignment of meanings in terms of definition and assessment of a leader/follower relationship…There may be leadership efforts, intentions, hopes, and fantasies, from the side of the manager/leader, and there may be attributions or perceptions from subordinates, but without convergence, there is no, strictly speaking, leadership."

Table 2. Academic definitions of leadership development

Article	Define or no?	Definition of leadership development
Van Velsor et al. (1998: 4)	Yes	"[The] expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes."
Day (2000: 582)	Yes	"Leadership development is defined as expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes."
Iles & Preece (2006: 317-318)	Yes	"Leadership development is about the development of leadership processes in context, as well as the development of leaders as individuals. Leader development can be seen as involving the enhancement of human capital, while leadership development is about the creation of social capital. Thus, the latter involves extending the collective ability of people to effectively undertake leadership roles and processes, and is centrally about helping them to understand how to join and build social networks, develop commitments, and access resources. These 'leadership roles' come with and without formal authority. It is thus necessary to understand and act on the interactions between the 'leader' and the social, economic and political environment, with leadership being an emergent property of this interaction."
Carroll & Levy (2010: 218) and Ford & Harding (2007)	Yes (but alternative to others)	"This is predicated on an understanding of leadership development as a process where participants receive "an invitation to seduce oneself through the dream of heroic leader""

Article	Define or no?	Definition of leadership development
Mabey (2013: 359)	Yes	“The term ‘development’ is intended to cover a wide range of activities, formal and informal, on-the-job and off-the-job, which are designed to enhance leadership capability both individually and collectively in organizations.”
Day et al. (2014: 63)	Yes	“leader development (intrapersonal, focused on individual leaders), leadership development (interpersonal, focused on enhancing leadership capacity).”
Day & Dragoni (2015: 134)	Yes (but note disagreement)	“Scholars define leader development as the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes. They define leadership development as the growth of a collective’s capacity to produce direction, alignment, and commitment.” “…shared understandings are lacking in terms of basic definitions, theoretical orientations, the most relevant indicators of leadership development, and other conceptual and measurement considerations.”
Carroll & Firth (2020: 5)	Yes (but alternative to others)	“There is also a growing stream of work for exploring such spaces as sites of identity regulation where such participants are very explicitly moulded to construct idealised leader selves in programmes assuming compliance to pre-fixed organisational technologies and outcomes (Ford and Harding, 2007; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Consequently, research is now exploring whether the actual ‘leadership’ in a leadership development programme can more likely be found in the dissent, resistance and struggle (as opposed to accommodation, acquiescence and acceptance) of participants to the explicit selection, shaping and assessment regimes associated with these programmes.”
Day et al. (2021: 1)	Yes	“Leadership development seeks to understand, predict, and intervene effectively in addressing the questions of how individuals develop as leaders and how collections of individuals develop a capacity for leadership.”

Table 3A: Interview protocol for managers

Questions	Purpose
How long have you worked at [organization]?	Icebreaker, background
What is your formal position?	Icebreaker, background
What does a typical day look like for you (if there are any typical days)?	Icebreaker, background
*Are you involved in leadership development at [organization]? *How would you describe your involvement? How long have you been involved?	Involvement in leadership development
*How do you define leadership? • Probe: What is leadership not?	Espoused meanings of leadership
*What does it mean to be a leader? • Probe: How would you define "leader"? • Probe: What does being a leader look like? • Probe: What does it not look like? • Probe: How do you know if someone is a leader or not?	Espoused meanings of leader
*Do you think you are a leader? Why?	
*Do people become leaders?	Espoused meanings of leader
*What do you think is the purpose of leadership development, broadly speaking? • Probe: Should we do leadership development? Why?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD ideal
*What do you think is the purpose of leadership development at [organization]? • Probe: Why does [organization] do leadership development?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD reality
*What understanding of leadership does the LD here try to instill in participants? *Do you think participants come in with conflicting ideas of leadership? • If so, do you try and change those ideas? How? • How effective do you think LD is at changing minds?	

Do you give any directives/requirements to the facilitator(s) for teaching leadership development? • Probe: Do you tell them to teach/not teach or do/not do certain things?	
*In an ideal world, what would change about participants after they engage in the LD program? • Probe: What would you not want to see change?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD
Can you give me some concrete examples of what you would like to see change about participants after they engage in the LD program? • Probe: Specific behaviors, attitudes, perspectives?	
What do you think does change, if anything, after participants complete the leadership development program? • Probe: Can you give me a specific example where you saw this change? What do you think does not tend to change after participants complete the leadership development program? • Probe: Can you give me a specific example where you saw this lack of change?	
What do you think is good about the leadership development at [organization]? What do you think is not good? What, if anything, would you change?	
Have you ever participated in a leadership development program? If so, what was your experience like? Did you take anything away from that experience? What stuck with you? What didn't?	

* = must ask

Table 3B: Interview protocol for facilitators

Questions	Purpose
How long have you worked at [organization]?	Icebreaker, background
What is your formal position?	Icebreaker, background
What does a typical day look like for you (if there are any typical days)?	Icebreaker, background
Are you involved in leadership development at [organization]? How would you describe your involvement? How long have you been involved?	Involvement in leadership development
*How do you define leadership? • Probe: What is leadership not?	Espoused meanings of leadership
*What does being a leader mean to you? • Probe: How would you define "leader"? • Probe: What does being a leader look like? • Probe: What does it not look like? • Probe: How do you know if someone is a leader or not?	Espoused meanings of leader
*Do you think you are a leader? Why?	
*Do people become leaders?	Espoused meanings of leader
*What do you think is the purpose of leadership development, broadly speaking? • Probe: Should we do leadership development? Why?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD ideal
*What do you think is the purpose of leadership development at [organization]? • Probe: Why does [organization] do leadership development? Are you given any directives/requirements for teaching leadership development? • Probe: Are you told to teach/not teach or do/not do certain things?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD reality
*What understanding of leadership does the LD here try to instill in participants? *Do you think participants come in with conflicting ideas of leadership?	

- If so, do you try and change those ideas? How? - How effective do you think LD is at changing minds?	
*In an ideal world, what would change about participants after they engage in the LD program? Probe: What would you not want to see change?	Espoused meanings/purposes of LD
Can you give me some concrete examples of what you would like to see change about participants after they engage in the LD program? Probe: Specific behaviors, attitudes, perspectives?	
What do you think does change, if anything, after participants complete the leadership development program? - Probe: Can you give me a specific example where you saw this change? What do you think does not tend to change after participants complete the leadership development program? - Probe: Can you give me a specific example where you saw this lack of change?	
What do you think is good about the leadership development at [organization]? What do you think is not good? What, if anything, would you change?	
Have you ever participated in a leadership development program? If so, what was your experience like? Did you take anything away from that experience? What stuck with you? What didn't?	

* = must ask

Table 4. Code definitions

Maintaining the Ambiguity of Leadership	
1) Use of general, non-specific language	Describing leadership using vague, general terms that lack specific anchors or boundary conditions
2) Meaning expansion	Expanding what "counts" as leadership
3) Defining by effects	Defining leadership by the outcomes it creates
4) Implying complexity	Describing leadership in ways that imply it is complex, hard to understand, and/or multi-faceted
5) Avoiding a definition	Explicitly avoiding a definition of leadership
Strategic ambiguity	
1) Expand who (a program can serve)	Increasing the pool of people who can and should engage in leadership development
2) Expand what (a program can cover)	Expanding what is appropriate to discuss in a leadership development program
3) Smooth functioning	Decrease chances of disruptive conflict in a leadership development program
Boundary Condition: Personalized Framing	
1) Leadership development as a personalized journey	Framing leadership development as an individual pursuit of self-discovery and transformation

Table 5. Additional evidence for main themes

	Maintaining the Ambiguity of Leadership
1) Use of general, non-specific language	“and leadership is all about: how do you cooperate and work with other people to achieve collective goals?” (Charlotte – Interview) “You know, so, and, and there's, there is a difference, you know, just because you've been given the title of leader doesn't make you a leader. Um, so, um, it, it's in the act of what you're doing and what you're producing.” (Emilia – Interview) “There are a lot of analogies between improv and leadership. You have to be able to give the spotlight and you have to be able to take the spotlight. [I] find that some leaders are really good at jumping in, taking the spotlight. Have to step back and let them take the spotlight.” (Christina – Observation)
2) Meaning expansion	“Uh I would see myself as a leader in my family. Um, you know, able to create experiences for my [spouse] and my children and my in-laws. And get people’s commitment and get everyone going in the same way.” (Rebecca – Interview) “You also deal with more ambiguity as you move up. “Become comfortable with the discomfort”, that’s the nature of leadership.” (Linda – Observation) “But I find that to be a useful frame because you know, if we were to google definitions of leadership you know you could spend hours going over it. And you know, most of them you would agree with. But what’s the common thread? And there isn’t one. So um, leadership is happening all the time, everywhere, in every conversation. And so, how can we elevate that? How can we deal with the big issues that society faces?” (Todd – Interview)
3) Defining by effects	“When leadership is absent, that’s the ill-performing, unperforming teams, people don’t know where they wanna go.” (Garrett – Interview) “you can tell the quality of your leadership by the quality of your conversations” (Christina – Observation)

	"I did give that little thought and I do think it is easiest, well it is easiest to define and measure by its outcomes…I like the concept within performance management of evaluating both the what and the how. The what in terms of it is the objectives of the leader, those that they are accountable for engaging leadership, were those objectives met? That's one lens to look through, but I think equally important lens then I think where we often tend to focus is how were those objectives achieved and to what degree did we not only achieve results, but were people satisfied to be involved in the process?" (John – Interview)
4) Implying complexity	"Yeah…we talked about how the ultimate goal of leadership is about creating change. You're leading people into the great unknown. Especially today we're doing things that have never been done before" (Linda – Observation) "You know, it's not easy. I wouldn't say leadership equals easy, at all. That's probably, it's not easy. And it's hard, and um uncomfortable and…yeah. It can be really challenging, so I think if people are looking for the quick way out, don't think that's it." (Margo – Interview) "Oh no. [Leadership] is much more than that [definition] but that's, that kind of boils it down to the essential part of leadership I think." (Reid – Interview)
5) Avoiding a definition	"And um…and it's, so because it's a construction you can't tell people that they're wrong [laughs]." (Charlotte – Interview) "We often don't define explicitly what that social process is. And then again, that's why I said, and to me that can vary significantly. And again, but sometimes we have to, based on what we know, the particular challenges at the leader level combined with the information, if we're working in a custom, the client is telling us that their leaders need to deliver, we can certainly make some approximations of what those behaviors should be. But again, that social process is sometimes in a little bit of a black box." (John – Interview) "Yeah, see I think everyone kind of has their own – that's one thing at Capacity, we kind of let people have their own…their own beliefs about leadership I guess." (Reid – Interview)
Strategic ambiguity	

1) Expand who (a program can serve)	"Um…I think everyone should try it out. From a personal perspective, everyone should try it out and and see how that feels. And see if that's something they'd want to pursue. Um, you know, I'd say most people in their lives have the opportunity – whether it's a school project or you know there are many opportunities along the way – to step up into informal or formal leadership roles for shorter periods of time. And to understand what it's all about. You know I think there are certainly people who try it out and who decide 'yeah that's not what I want to do, I want to stay in my expert role.' And you know that's where I'm happiest. So I think people should try it out, but yeah, I don't think everybody's going to step into that role." (Amanda – Interview) "I think people have, everyone has the ability to influence someone's behavior. It's just a matter of whether or not they recognize that or even choose, because part of it is a choice to use those characteristics in that way." (Jordan – Interview) "And I do think its important to note that you do play all of the roles, you play all roles sometimes in the span of 5 minutes. But you all play a role in shaping the whole leadership culture. Whether you are playing the [makes air quotes] "leader role" or not, you all play a role in building that foundation. So you all play a role in leadership in shaping that role, shaping that foundation." (Linda – Observation)
2) Expand what (a program can cover)	"We know that people in your role have to give feedback. We are going to give you a tool to make that as easy and painless as possible. Listening is important. Having those development conversations…we want to give you a chance to practice that. Also influence [smiles], we know people at your level have to influence a lot: up down center…" (Linda – Observation) "That was interesting because we talked about how the war on talent is influencing that… people walking for more money. So we talked about how to deal with that, tactics to deal with that. Providing training, promotions within." (Betsy – Observation) "Some of the biggest ones that we're seeing, especially since 2020 and started the pandemic, are things related to teams and particularly hybrid teams. We've got some team content, but not as strong as, or I'll say not as much as people are requesting, particularly in the hybrid

	team space that we've got some equity, diversity, and inclusion related competencies we're seeing. As that area gets more mature, we're seeing other competencies related to that where people are coming with their own kind of focus. So, that's one. And then, probably, the biggest one where we don't have a particular competency for is leading in ways to connect to the clients. So, in support of their clients. What are the leadership behaviors that give client focus make us a client focused organization?" (Deb – Interview)
3) Smooth functioning	"I mean I do have a file of all these cool definitions of leadership that I like and that I use sometimes. But they're limited, and they don't work across cultures and across sectors and so [our] model works wherever you use it, it works. In whatever culture, hierarchical…interdependent, independent cultures, in um power…cultures with great power distance – Middle East would be an example – in uh collectivist cultures; I mean it works every time. And it works not because 'oh there's the definition' but it creates an opportunity for people to interact with each other about leadership. And to come to an understanding of, if its in a team or a single organization or a community, there's an understanding of what they're trying to accomplish together. That social process." (Todd – Interview) **Pam**: I don't want to be more assertive. I guess I've gotten what I've needed with my other skills. I had to go back a couple years to think of an example where I could have been more assertive. Like "ok that style didn't work, the bridging didn't work". [but that was years ago]. **Beth**: Somebody said, you have to know your audience. You have to know who these styles might work with. I got a 5 in asserting, that's definitely not my style. That's not my go-to. But I can say no. When people come to me for things. Describes how she sets boundaries with people, if they come to her for something and she says no - but here's what else I can do for you [Beth notes that "I guess that is an example of negotiating]" **Beth**: can anyone think of an example where you'd be able to try your underutilized influence styles? Pam shakes head. Beth says no me neither. I give a sort of generic example of using more data." (Observation)

	"Part of [dealing with conflicting opinions] is seeking to understand, you know "tell me more." You know, "how do you see it, why?" Where does that come from? And then pulling, and then finding the common ground right? Like ok in reality yes, we have some common understandings of this. Cause its helping somebody else right? Take what they've already learned take some maybe potentially new, to help them build it to something a little bit more than where they're at." (Garrett – Interview)
	Boundary Condition: Personalized Framing
1) Leadership development as a personalized journey	"Again, it starts with the self. Um, so all of our programs tend to start with self and then move on to, you know, team or organization and then organization or society. So that, you know, if you think about kind of the onion it is the self in the center, or you know concentric circles and then it gets kind of bigger from there. Mmhmm." (Amanda – Interview) "And um, so that's the kind of approach I think. It's not to necessarily change people's mind, it's to grow people's minds. So they see other options rather than um us being right or wrong." (Charlotte – Interview) "Remember this: the commitments that you make to yourself are going to be so important. You are going to be the ones who see that there are changes that need to be made. Others are not going to tap you on the shoulder…you are going to make the commitment and do these new behaviors…it's the commitments you make to yourself to try these new behaviors." (Linda – Observation) **Linda**: So these make up your personality. Why do you think we talk about traits and personalities when we're talking about leadership and coaching? **Tyler**: We have to understand ourselves to understand others **Linda**: Yep, self-awareness is key. (Observation) "Ah, [laughs] you know what my goal is Andrew? For them to go, 'yeah I need to do that better.' Whether its being a better me, being a better dad, being a better mom, how I interact with my employees, or, like its that I need to think about what I'm doing and I need to do

better at it. And maybe potentially have some more tangible tools or ways in which they're gonna do it. 'I wanna change.'" (Garrett – Interview)

"So I think that we have always prided ourselves on kind of taking a holistic approach to leadership, understanding that you doing well at your job doesn't matter if your family life is terrible, if you have no community to interact with. So a lot of our programs emphasize self-awareness is always kind of the foundation, the first thing that we talk about. We also really emphasize that we might have experts in leadership, but we don't have experts in who you are. We're not going to tell you what to do. We're going to discover who you are, and based on who you are and what you want, we will make recommendations of what you could do." (Nicole – Interview)

Table 6. Leadership development journals

Journals	Number of first-round hits
Academy of Management Review	59
Academy of Management Journal	66
Administrative Science Quarterly	33
Academy of Management Annals	38
Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice	43
Human Resource Management	188
Journal of Applied Psychology	89
Journal of Business Ethics	488
Journal of Business Venturing	36
Journal of International Business Studies	58
Journal of Organizational Behavior	71
Journal of Management	113
Journal of Management Studies	117
Journal of World Business	82
Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes	23
Organization Research Methods	31
Organization Science	104
Organization Studies	103
Personnel Psychology	150
Strategic Management Journal	147
Strategic Organization	24
The Leadership Quarterly	213

Table 7. Leader behavior journals

Journals	Number of first-round hits
Academy of Management Review	53
Academy of Management Journal	103
Administrative Science Quarterly	29
Academy of Management Annals	26
Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice	32
Human Resource Management	80
Journal of Applied Psychology	222
Journal of Business Ethics	653
Journal of Business Venturing	18
Journal of International Business Studies	35
Journal of Organizational Behavior	196
Journal of Management	156
Journal of Management Studies	23
Journal of World Business	38
Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes	64
Organization Research Methods	14
Organization Science	68
Organization Studies	13
Personnel Psychology	109
Strategic Management Journal	76
Strategic Organization	11
The Leadership Quarterly	272

Table 8. Academic literature search rules

Rule	Reasoning
Pull recommendations from practical/managerial implications sections	I am looking specifically for recommendations to practice.
If there is no practical/managerial implications section, pull recommendations from the discussion.	In some cases, there are recommendations in the discussion without separate headings.
Articles focused on training more broadly are not included.	To avoid conflation with the training literature.
Recommendations must be explicit and focused.	To ensure that the authors meant a statement as a recommendation.
Recommendations must be content-focused, not methodological in nature.	My research question is focused on the content of recommendations.
Must be a specific recommendation, not a description of results.	A summary or description of results does not necessarily indicate a recommendation.
Leadership development literature specific	
Not including executive coaching, career development, or coaching in general…	To align my data with my question I need to stay focused on leader(ship) development.
…But if they say their research has implications for LD, include the recommendations.	In this case, I include these recommendations because they represent instances of academics offering relevant recommendations to practice.
Leader self-development not included unless there is a programmatic component.	I am focusing on leadership development programs, not individual's self-development.
Leader behavior literature specific	
Recommendations must be about leader behavior itself.	I am searching for the kinds of things academics are implying should be trained.
Recommendations can be aimed at both individuals and organizations.	Both types of recommendations indicate what academics think leaders should do and thus what LDPs should train.

Table 9. Example of first-order codes

Recommendation/Claim	Source	First-order code
"An organizational stance could involve support for such activities and a context that creates space for leaders to deliberately practice leadership."	Academic (LD)	Organizations should create space to practice leadership
"Mechanisms must be designed for following up on development plans. While emphasis was made on getting people to prepare and discuss development plans, more work is needed to put in place mechanisms to track decisions, career moves, and other development activities."	Academic (LD)	Evaluate development program success
"As our individual-level experiment data showed, it is important to consider how the extent and the use of charisma in communication may best be varied by audience."	Academic (LB)	Vary CLTs depending on audience
"In terms of practical implications, we suggest that one key recommendation for team leaders or managers of multi-professional teams—in action team settings as well as in stable non-action teams—is to consider the impact of their language on employee voice. Using more inclusive pronouns such as 'WE', 'US', and 'OUR' and as well as invitations and appreciations of team member input can help teams to overcome hierarchical barriers and foster input from below."	Academic (LB)	Use inclusive pronouns to encourage input from lower-level employees
"Learn how to accelerate change in an organization; develop a deep understanding of what is required to drive change and make it last."	Practitioner	Learn to lead change
"Be conscious of the way you present yourself as a leader: notice how your presence affects other people, listen intently to them, and learn how to adjust your behavior in response to their cues."	Practitioner	Improve self-awareness

Table 10. Examples of code name changes in leadership development coding

Original name	Final name	Explanation
Provide space/time for feedback (2nd order)	Follow-up on development efforts (2nd order)	As my coding progressed, I realized that the notion of providing time and space for feedback was part of a larger recommendation to follow-up on development efforts.
Match LD to participant needs (2nd order)	Align LD with participant readiness (2nd order)	Align and participant readiness more accurately fit the literature's conceptualization based on the recommendations I was reading.
Focus on "doing" leadership (2nd order)	LD should involve practicing leadership (2nd order)	The latter code more accurately fit the idea of giving participants time and space to "try out" what they were learning, whether that be in their organization or in a class setting.
Develop people's identities as leaders (2nd order)	LD should prioritize deep-level change (2nd order)	As my coding progressed, I saw more examples of constructs that, although not identity, similarly related to the idea of "deep" change (e.g., ways of thinking, mindsets).

Table 11. Examples of code name changes in leader behavior coding

Original name	Final name	Explanation
Understand your impact on others (2nd order)	Understand behavior's impact (2nd order)	These two codes were separate. I decided to combine them because all of the recommendations in the former code were about behavior, so they fit under the slightly more general category of understanding a behavior's impact.
Use a specific style of behavior (2nd order)	Use a specific leader behavior (2nd order) OR Use a specific leadership style (2nd order)	I split this code into two to allow for differences between recommending a specific behavior and recommending a broad style.
Match behavior to desired outcome (2nd order)	Do "X" to promote "Y" outcome (2nd order) OR Adjust behaviors to desired outcomes (2nd order)	I separated this code into two because one (X to Y) refers to a specific behavior-outcome match. The latter (adjust) refers not to a specific behavior but to the idea that leaders should adjust behaviors depending on the outcome they want to create.
Teach leaders the process behind behavior's impact (2nd order)	Teach leaders about behavior's impact (2nd order)	These were separate codes. I decided to combine them under the more general code because the idea of teaching process did not substantially change the meaning of the code.

Table 12. Examples of code name changes in practitioner data

Original name	Final name	Explanation
Organizational-level change (1st order)	Learn to drive change OR How to support innovation (1st order)	Originally I coded some claims under a general banner of helping leaders create organization-level change. As the number of these claims increased, I was able to more precisely code them as focusing on creating change or supporting innovation.
Strategic planning (1st order)	Learning to create and implement strategy (1st order)	Strategic planning was more specific than the claims the code was capturing. Instead, these claims were more generally about enhancing a person's ability to create/implement strategy.
Consulting skills (1st order)	How to manage relationships (1st order)	There was only one claim under consulting skills, which would have been a too-narrow code. The claim was about managing relationships with clients, so I added it under the more general managing relationships code.
Work with experts (1st order)	Participants learn from and with experts (1st order)	The original name did not capture the claims I started seeing about learning from expert peers. The final name thus captured the idea that participants would learn both from facilitators/coaches/faculty and from fellow participants.
Positive leaders (2nd order)	Referencing idealized forms of leadership (2nd order)	Positive leaders was a code I used to capture a wide range of generally vague but nice-sounding claims about how people could develop as leaders. I later changed the name to idealized leadership to connect with literature on the idealized/romanticized view of leaders.
Real impact (2nd order)	Programs are relevant for your organization (2nd order)	I changed this code name because the "real" in real impact implied something closer to objectivity/measurability. The subcodes were more closely referring to the idea that the content is relevant to the leader and the business.
Task-related outcomes (2nd order)	Getting things done (2nd order)	Task-related outcomes did not accurately capture all of the subcodes (e.g., exerting influence and delegate effectively). But each of these subcodes was – in contrast to the idea of being more enlightened – about getting practical things done well.

Table 13. Example of claims with multiple codes in practicioner data

Claim	Code 1	Code 2
"We understand the changing business landscape including how technology is changing the world of work. We bring our diverse network of subject matter experts and alliance partners to address your leadership challenges."	*Business relevance* We understand the changing business landscape including how technology is changing the world of work…	*Learn from and with experts* …We bring our diverse network of subject matter experts and alliance partners…
"All our solutions are designed and driven by [X firms'] unique experiential learning model, delivered by world-class facilitators, and constructed through our proprietary solution mapping process, which ensures a design that is customised to your organisational context and learning objectives."*	*Experiential* … All our solutions are designed and driven by Impact's unique experiential learning model…	*Personalized* … constructed through our proprietary solution mapping process, which ensures a design that is customised to your organisational context and learning objectives.

Note. *This claim was triple-coded because it also referenced "world-class facilitators" (coded at Learn from and with experts).

Table 14. (Mis)alignment between academic recommendations and practicioner claims

Recommendation	**Claim**	**Interpretation**
Emphasize participant agency Increase self-awareness Increase knowledge Match behavior to context	Creating the "enlightened leader"	Alignment
Include experiential learning Evaluate and follow-up Use various development strategies	Creates real organizational impact	Alignment
Create environmental alignment Create alignment Context must support development	NA	Recommendations not reflected in claims
Broaden development content	NA	Recommendation not reflected in claims
Match behavior to outcome Train and enact consistent behaviors	NA	Recommendations not reflected in claims
NA	Creating practical outcomes	Claim not reflected in recommendations
NA	Creating strategic leaders	Claim not reflected in recommendations
NA	Can help any organization	Claim not reflected in recommendations

Table 15. Venn diagram categorization key

Aggregate Dimension	Venn Diagram Categorization
Broaden development content (LD)	Broaden development content
Context must support development (LD) Create alignment (LD) Create environmental alignment (LB)	Organizational support/alignment
Match behavior to outcome (LB)	Specific behaviors for specific outcomes
Train and enact consistent behaviors (LB)	Teach a particular style/behavior
Match behavior to context (LB) Creating the "enlightened" leader (P)	Behavior flexibility
Creating practical outcomes (P)	Bottom-line outcomes
Creating strategic leaders (P)	Creating strategic leaders
Can help any organization (P)	Applicable to client needs
Include experiential learning (LD) Use various development strategies (LD) Creates real organizational impact (P)	Relevant and experiential
Emphasize participant agency (LD) Increase self-awareness (LB) Increase knowledge (LB) Creating the "enlightened" leader (P)	Focus on self
Evaluate and follow-up (LD) Create environmental alignment (LB) Creates real organizational impact (P)	Evaluate success

FIGURES

Figure 1. Dissertation process flowchart

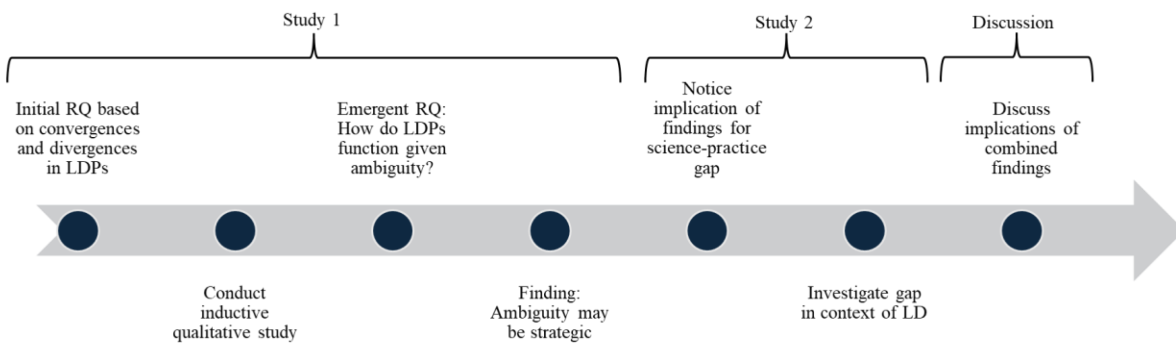


Figure 2. Search and retrieval for academic LD corpus

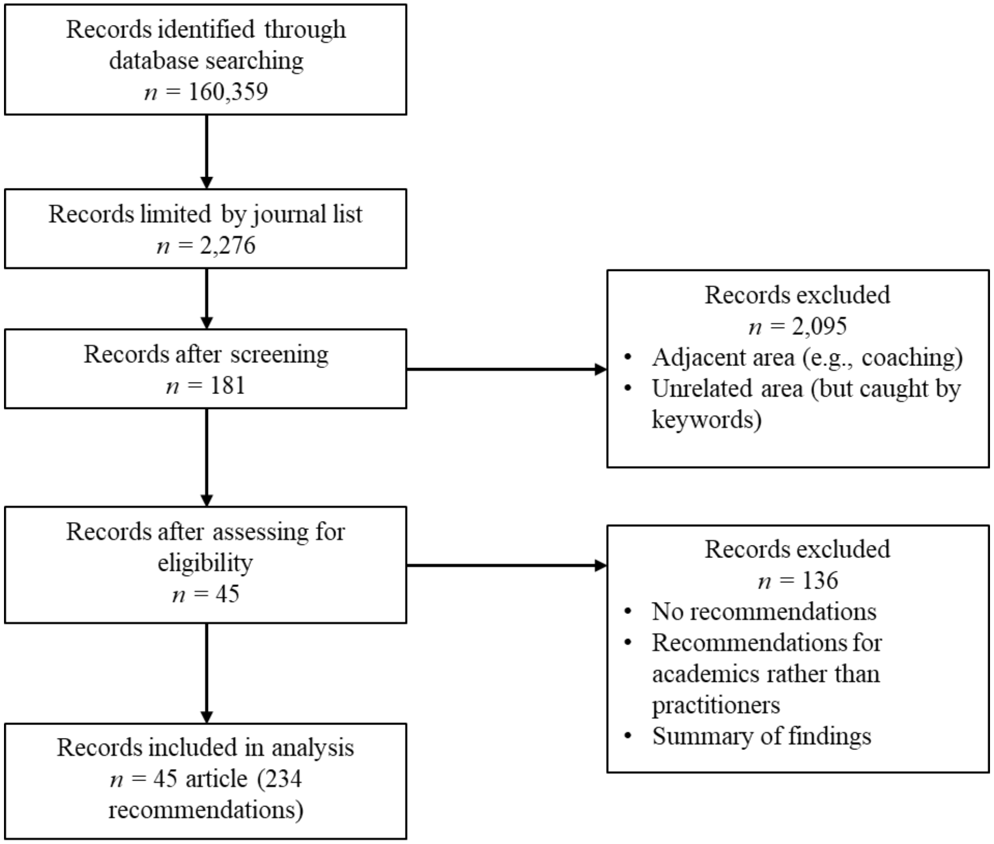


Figure 3. Search and retrieval for academic LB corpus

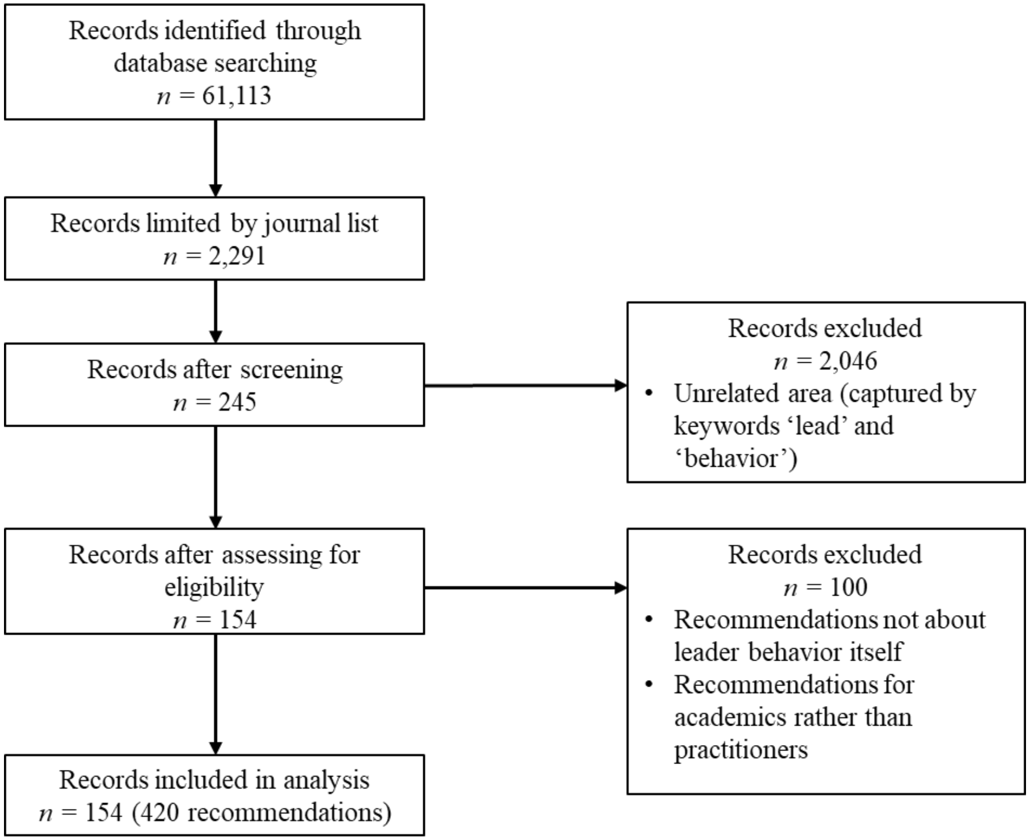


Figure 4. Search and retrieval for practitioner corpus

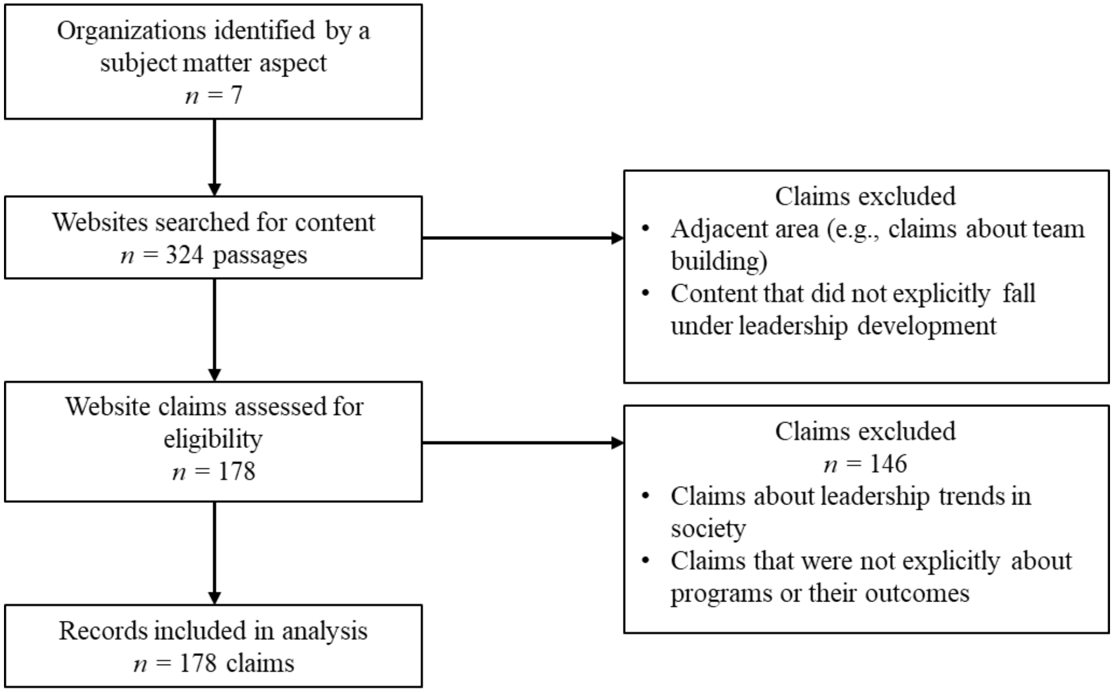
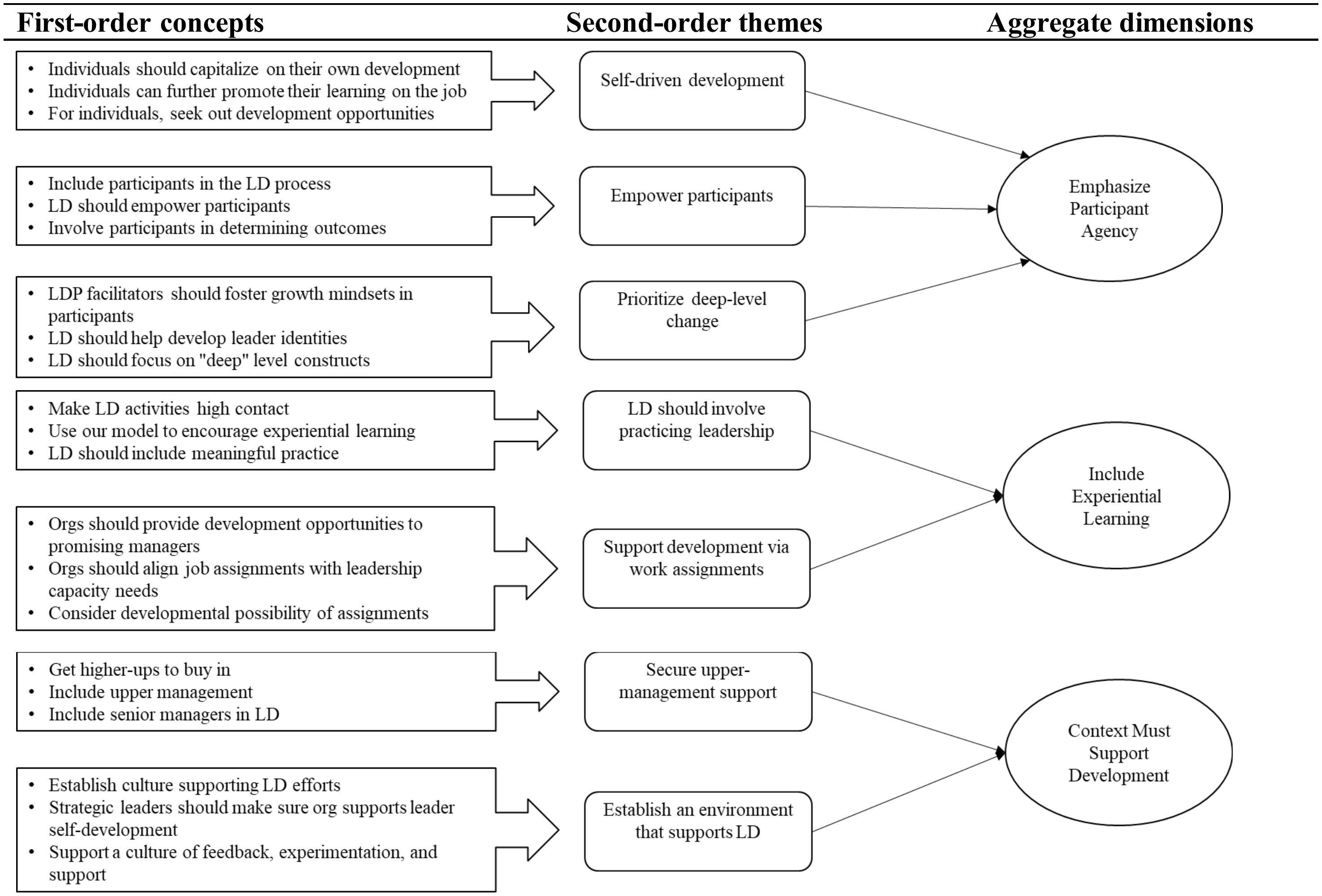
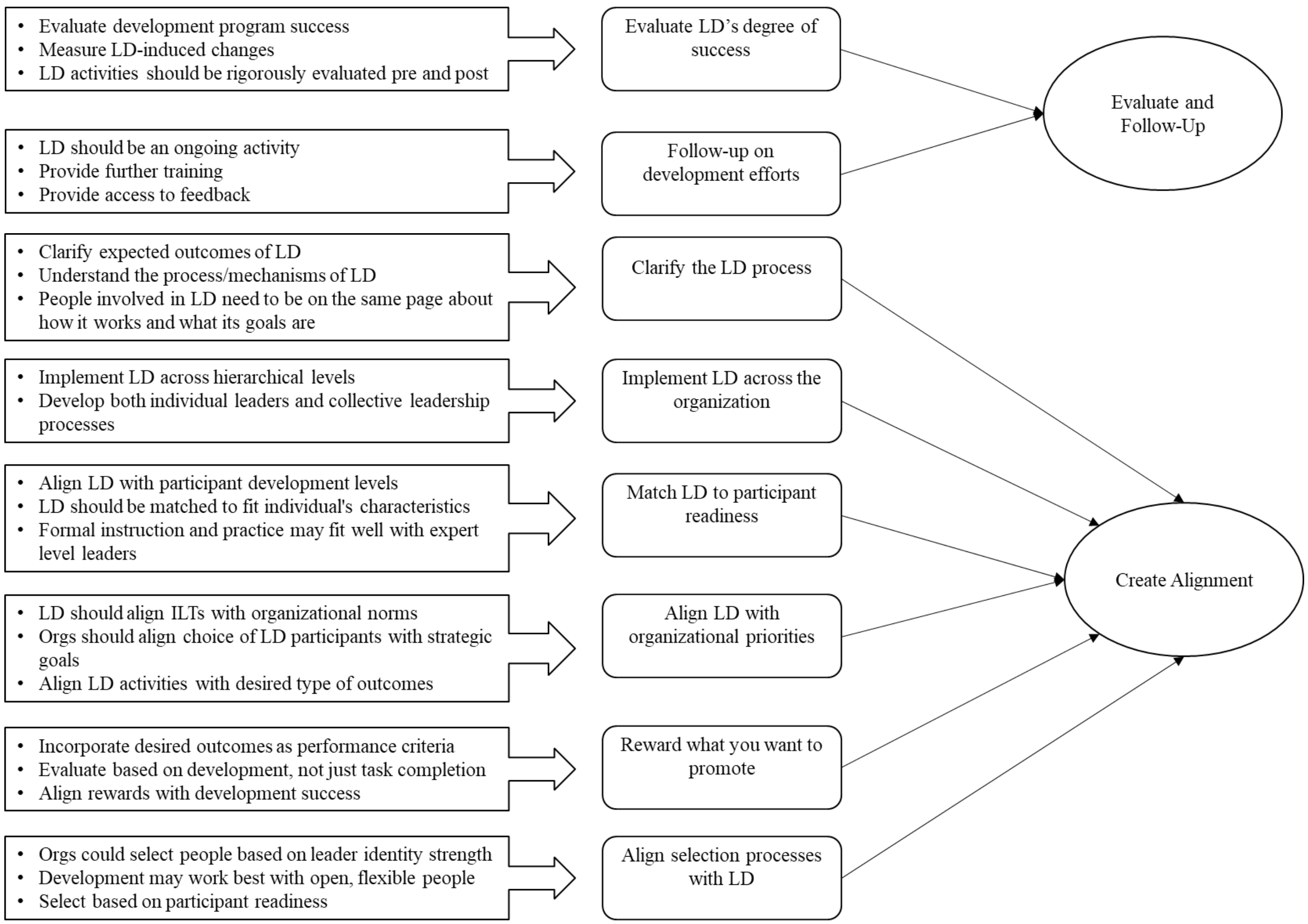


Figure 5. Study 2 academic LD data structure




• Evaluate development program success
• Measure LD-induced changes
• LD activities should be rigorously evaluated pre and post
Evaluate LD's degree of success
• LD should be an ongoing activity
• Provide further training
• Provide access to feedback
Follow-up on development efforts
Evaluate and Follow-Up
• Clarify expected outcomes of LD
• Understand the process/mechanisms of LD
• People involved in LD need to be on the same page about how it works and what its goals are
Clarify the LD process
• Implement LD across hierarchical levels
• Develop both individual leaders and collective leadership processes
Implement LD across the organization
• Align LD with participant development levels
• LD should be matched to fit individual's characteristics
• Formal instruction and practice may fit well with expert level leaders
Match LD to participant readiness
• LD should align ILTs with organizational norms
• Orgs should align choice of LD participants with strategic goals
• Align LD activities with desired type of outcomes
Align LD with organizational priorities
Create Alignment
• Incorporate desired outcomes as performance criteria
• Evaluate based on development, not just task completion
• Align rewards with development success
Reward what you want to promote
• Orgs could select people based on leader identity strength
• Development may work best with open, flexible people
• Select based on participant readiness
Align selection processes with LD

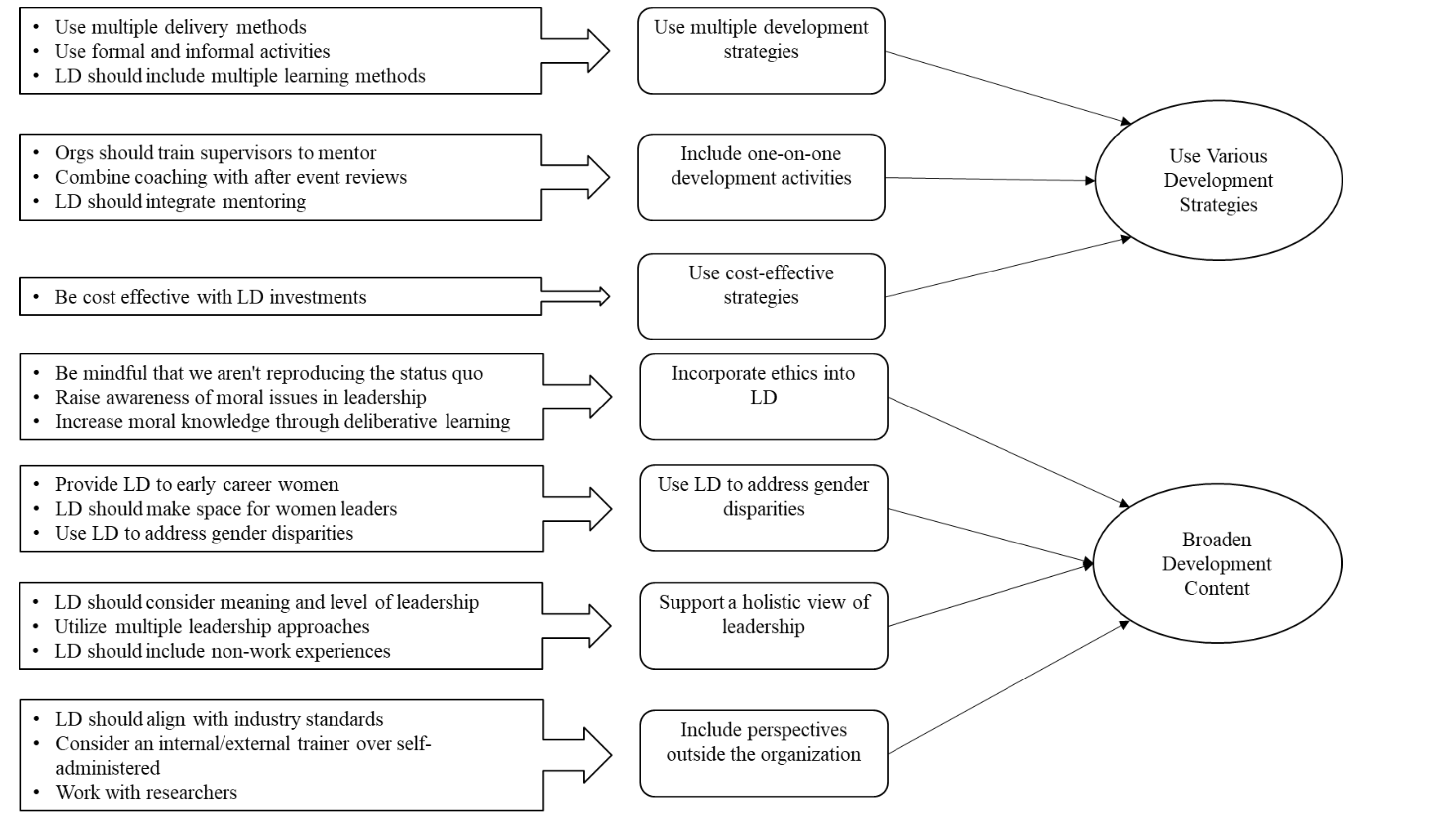
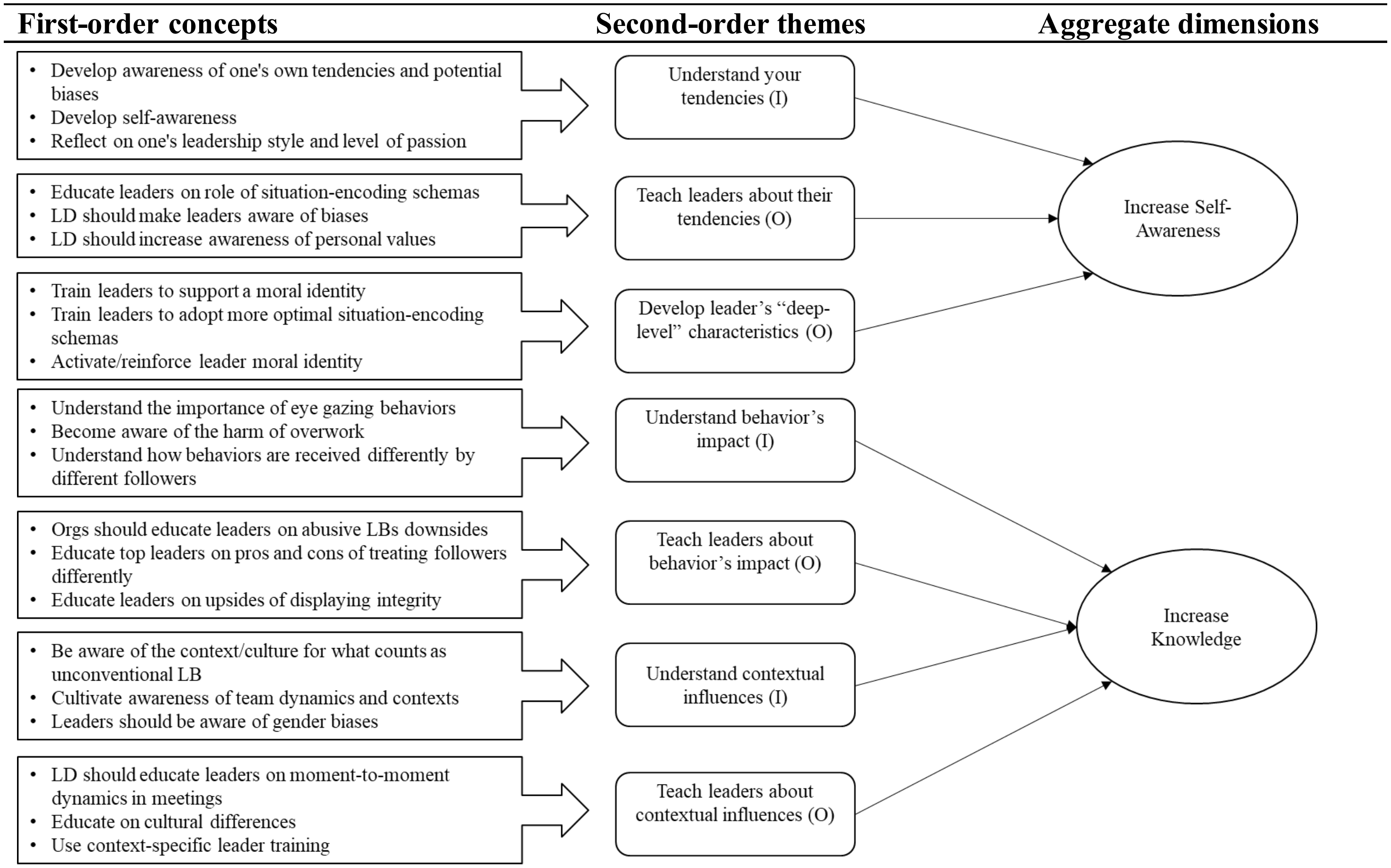
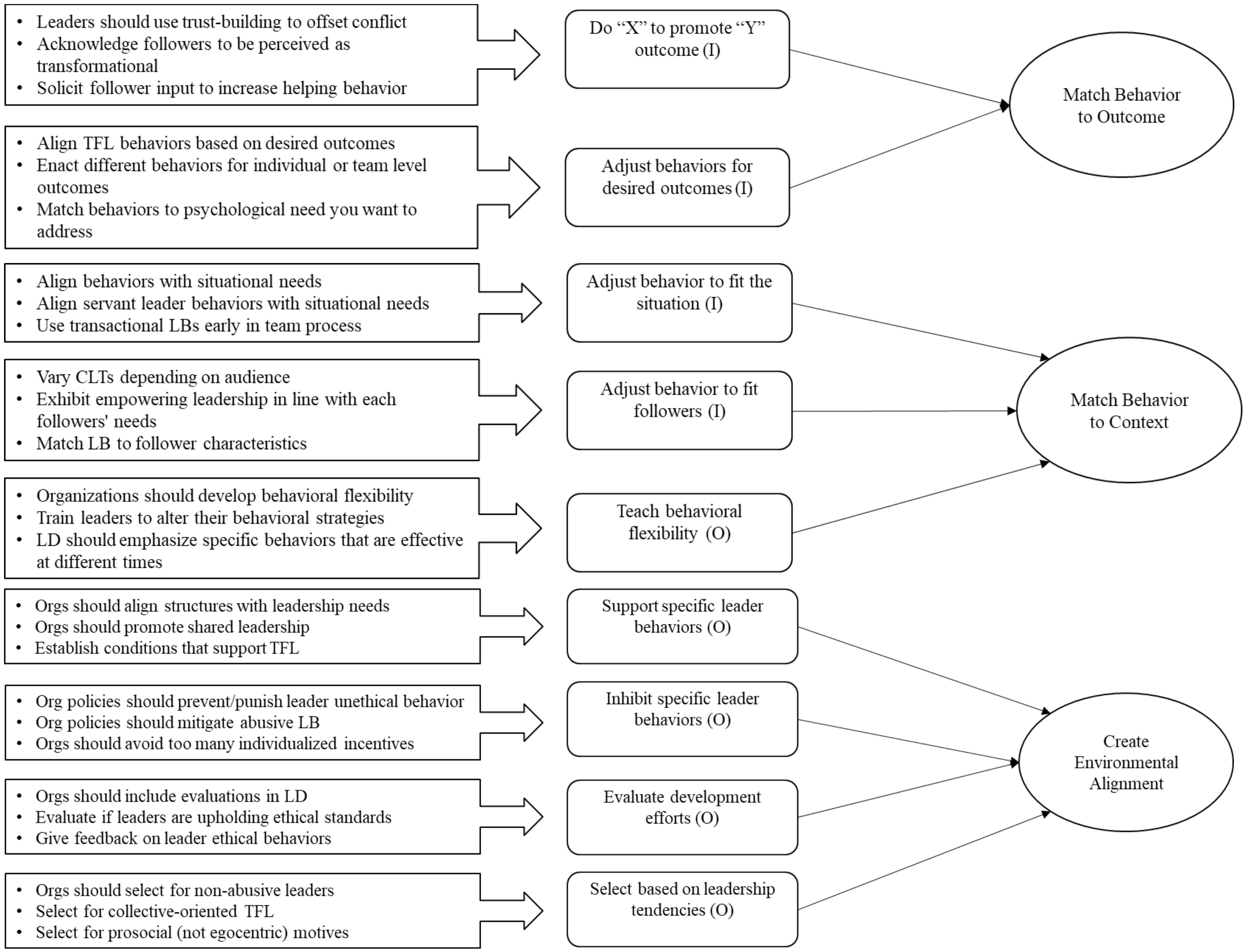

• Use multiple delivery methods
• Use formal and informal activities
• LD should include multiple learning methods
Use multiple development strategies
• Orgs should train supervisors to mentor
• Combine coaching with after event reviews
• LD should integrate mentoring
Include one-on-one development activities
• Be cost effective with LD investments
Use cost-effective strategies
Use Various Development Strategies
• Be mindful that we aren't reproducing the status quo
• Raise awareness of moral issues in leadership
• Increase moral knowledge through deliberative learning
Incorporate ethics into LD
• Provide LD to early career women
• LD should make space for women leaders
• Use LD to address gender disparities
Use LD to address gender disparities
• LD should consider meaning and level of leadership
• Utilize multiple leadership approaches
• LD should include non-work experiences
Support a holistic view of leadership
• LD should align with industry standards
• Consider an internal/external trainer over self-administered
• Work with researchers
Include perspectives outside the organization
Broaden Development Content

Figure 6. Study 2 academic LB data structure





• Leaders should use trust-building to offset conflict
• Acknowledge followers to be perceived as transformational
• Solicit follower input to increase helping behavior
Do "X" to promote "Y" outcome (I)
• Align TFL behaviors based on desired outcomes
• Enact different behaviors for individual or team level outcomes
• Match behaviors to psychological need you want to address
Adjust behaviors for desired outcomes (I)
Match Behavior to Outcome
• Align behaviors with situational needs
• Align servant leader behaviors with situational needs
• Use transactional LBs early in team process
Adjust behavior to fit the situation (I)
• Vary CLTs depending on audience
• Exhibit empowering leadership in line with each followers' needs
• Match LB to follower characteristics
Adjust behavior to fit followers (I)
Match Behavior to Context
• Organizations should develop behavioral flexibility
• Train leaders to alter their behavioral strategies
• LD should emphasize specific behaviors that are effective at different times
Teach behavioral flexibility (O)
• Orgs should align structures with leadership needs
• Orgs should promote shared leadership
• Establish conditions that support TFL
Support specific leader behaviors (O)
• Org policies should prevent/punish leader unethical behavior
• Org policies should mitigate abusive LB
• Orgs should avoid too many individualized incentives
Inhibit specific leader behaviors (O)
Create Environmental Alignment
• Orgs should include evaluations in LD
• Evaluate if leaders are upholding ethical standards
• Give feedback on leader ethical behaviors
Evaluate development efforts (O)
• Orgs should select for non-abusive leaders
• Select for collective-oriented TFL
• Select for prosocial (not egocentric) motives
Select based on leadership tendencies (O)

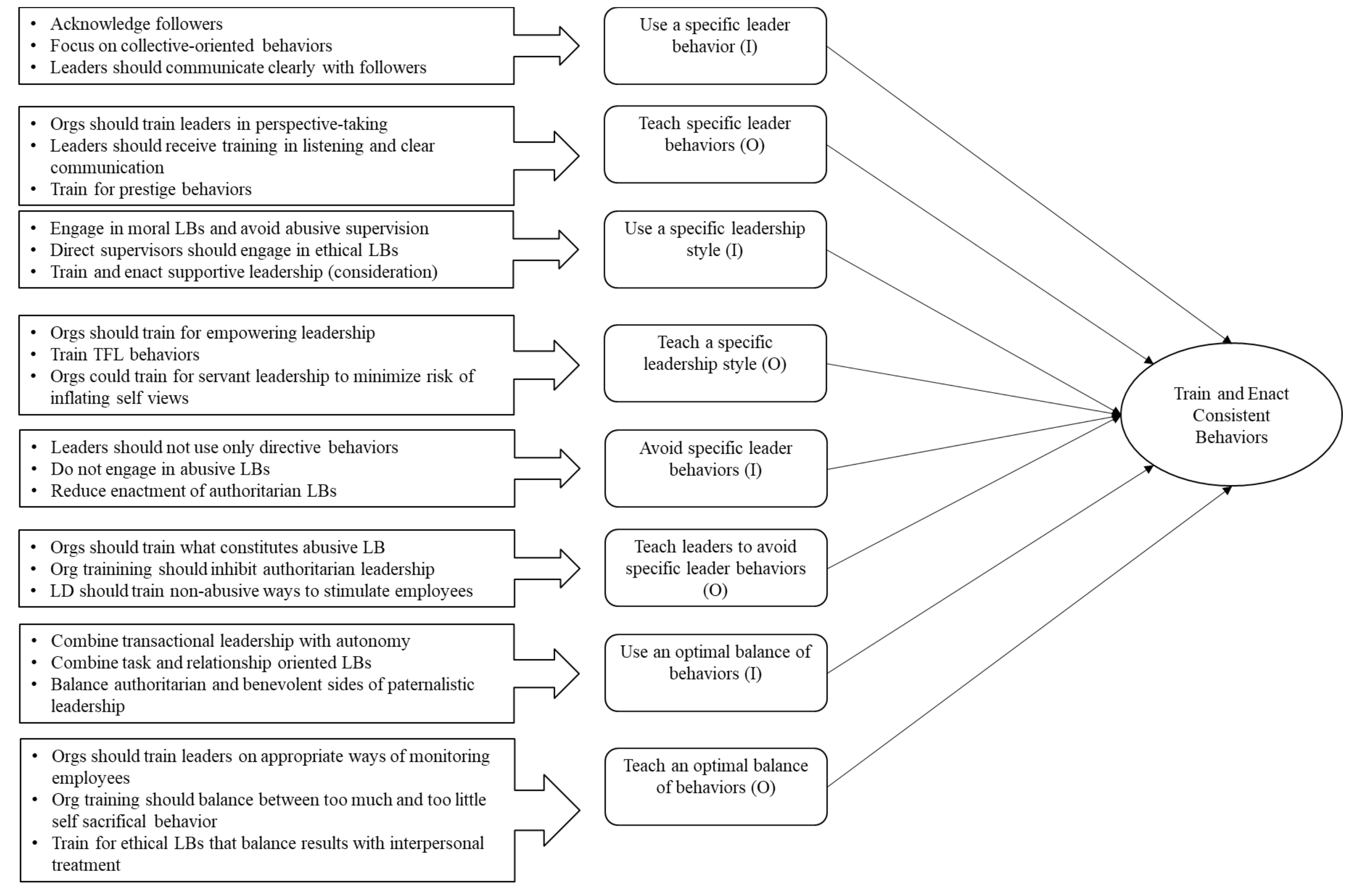
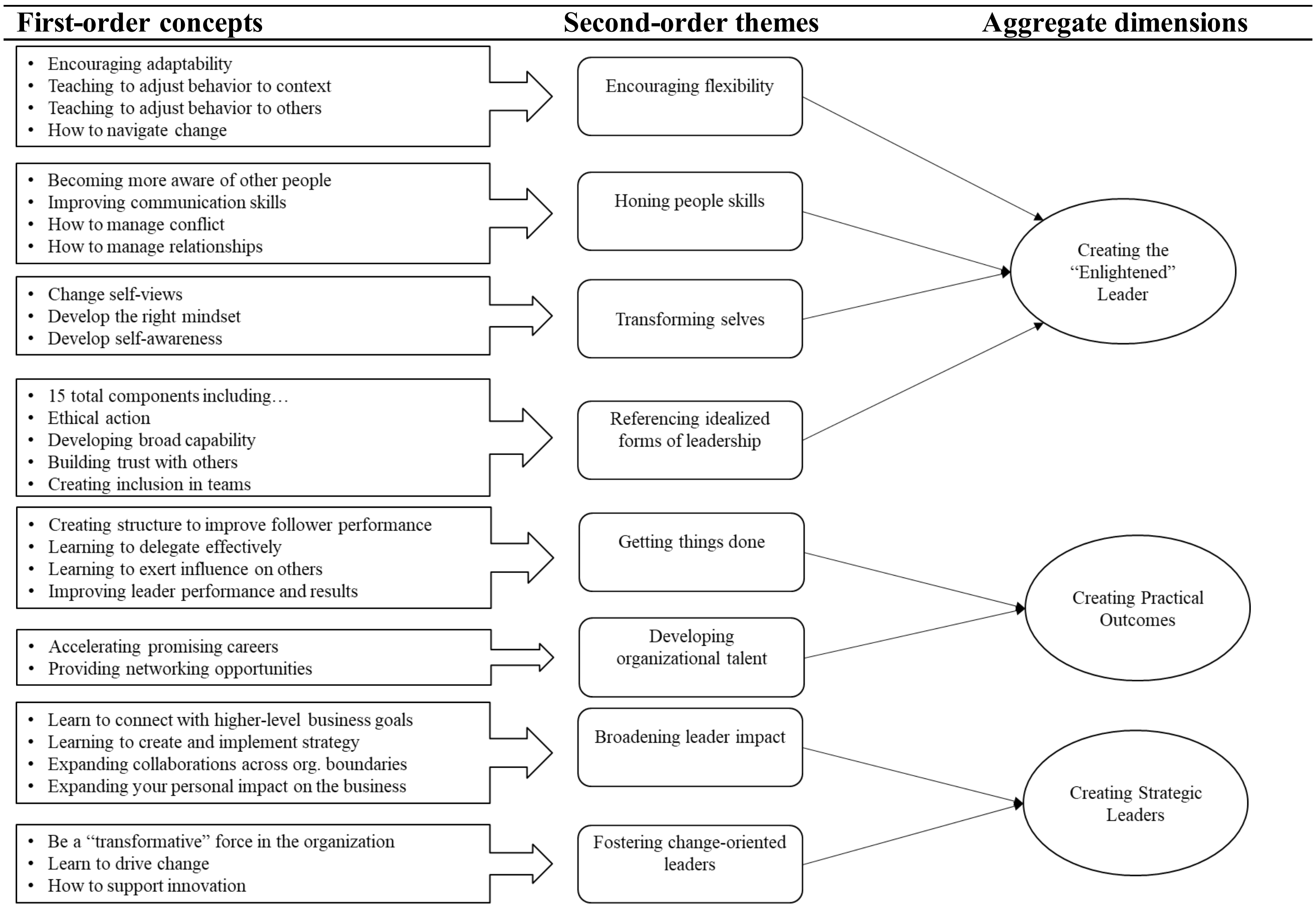

• Acknowledge followers
• Focus on collective-oriented behaviors
• Leaders should communicate clearly with followers
• Orgs should train leaders in perspective-taking
• Leaders should receive training in listening and clear communication
• Train for prestige behaviors
• Engage in moral LBs and avoid abusive supervision
• Direct supervisors should engage in ethical LBs
• Train and enact supportive leadership (consideration)
• Orgs should train for empowering leadership
• Train TFL behaviors
• Orgs could train for servant leadership to minimize risk of inflating self views
• Leaders should not use only directive behaviors
• Do not engage in abusive LBs
• Reduce enactment of authoritarian LBs
• Orgs should train what constitutes abusive LB
• Org trainining should inhibit authoritarian leadership
• LD should train non-abusive ways to stimulate employees
• Combine transactional leadership with autonomy
• Combine task and relationship oriented LBs
• Balance authoritarian and benevolent sides of paternalistic leadership
• Orgs should train leaders on appropriate ways of monitoring employees
• Org training should balance between too much and too little self sacrifical behavior
• Train for ethical LBs that balance results with interpersonal treatment
Use a specific leader behavior (I)
Teach specific leader behaviors (O)
Use a specific leadership style (I)
Teach a specific leadership style (O)
Avoid specific leader behaviors (I)
Teach leaders to avoid specific leader behaviors (O)
Use an optimal balance of behaviors (I)
Teach an optimal balance of behaviors (O)
Train and Enact Consistent Behaviors

Figure 7. Study 2 practitioner data structure



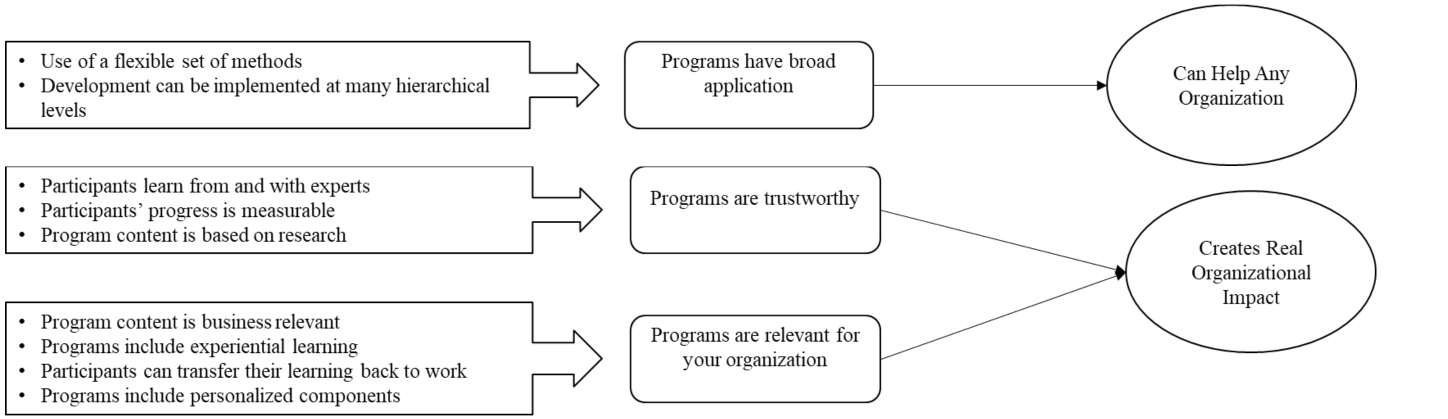
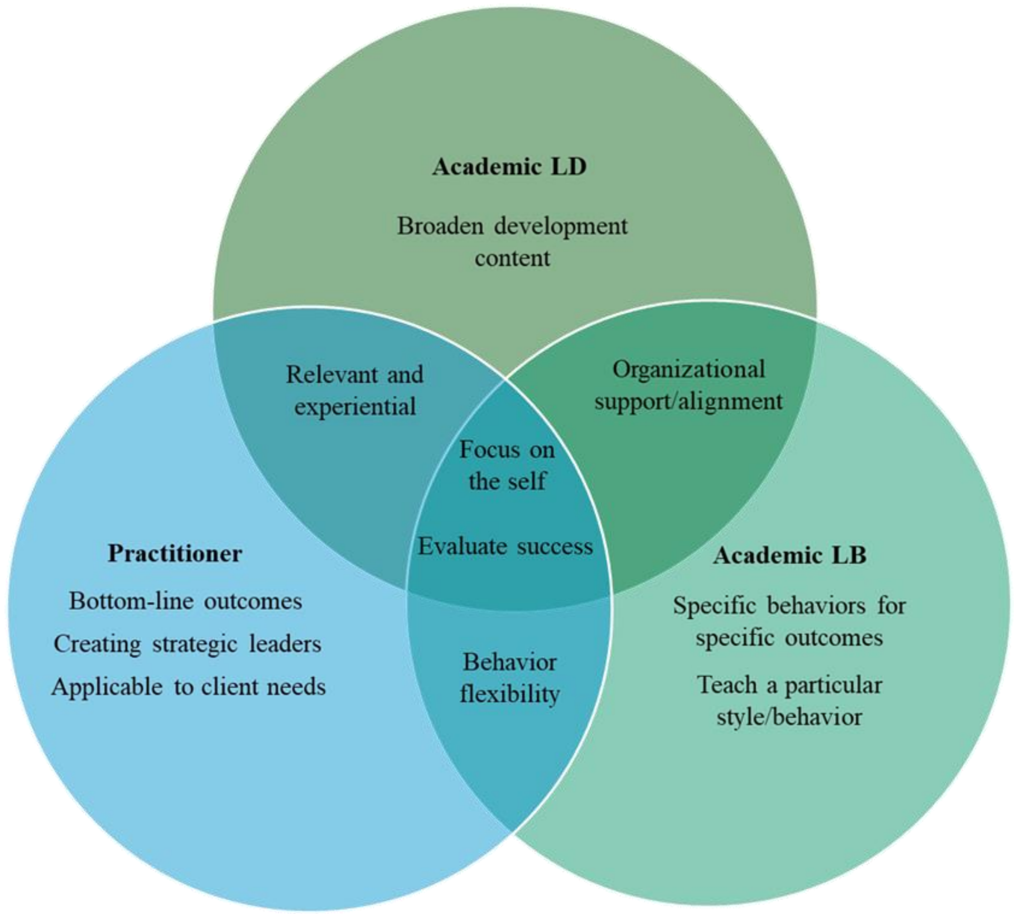

• Use of a flexible set of methods
• Development can be implemented at many hierarchical levels
Programs have broad application
Can Help Any Organization
• Participants learn from and with experts
• Participants' progress is measurable
• Program content is based on research
Programs are trustworthy
Creates Real Organizational Impact
• Program content is business relevant
• Programs include experiential learning
• Participants can transfer their learning back to work
• Programs include personalized components
Programs are relevant for your organization

Figure 8. Venn diagram depicting aggregate dimension comparisons



APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL FIGURES

Figure A1: Day and Dragoni's (2015) leadership development model

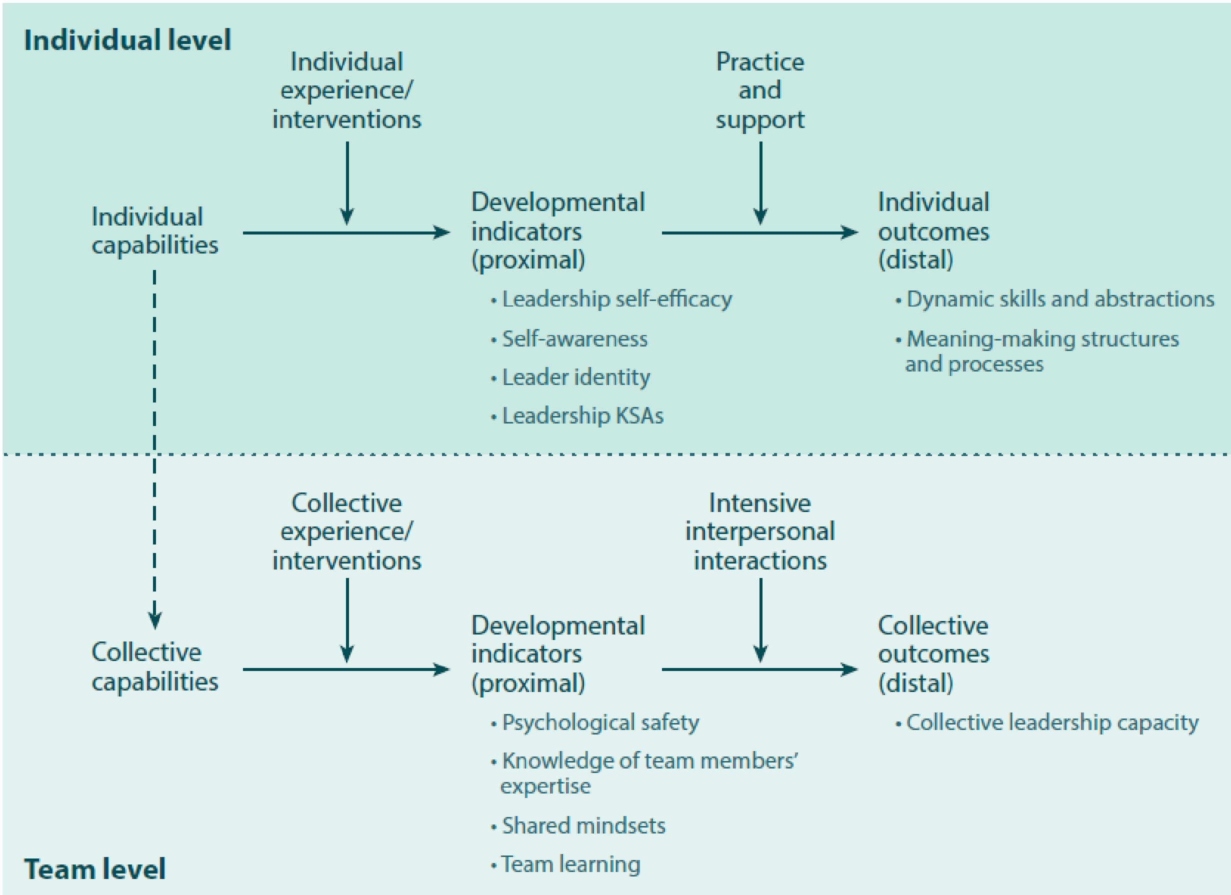
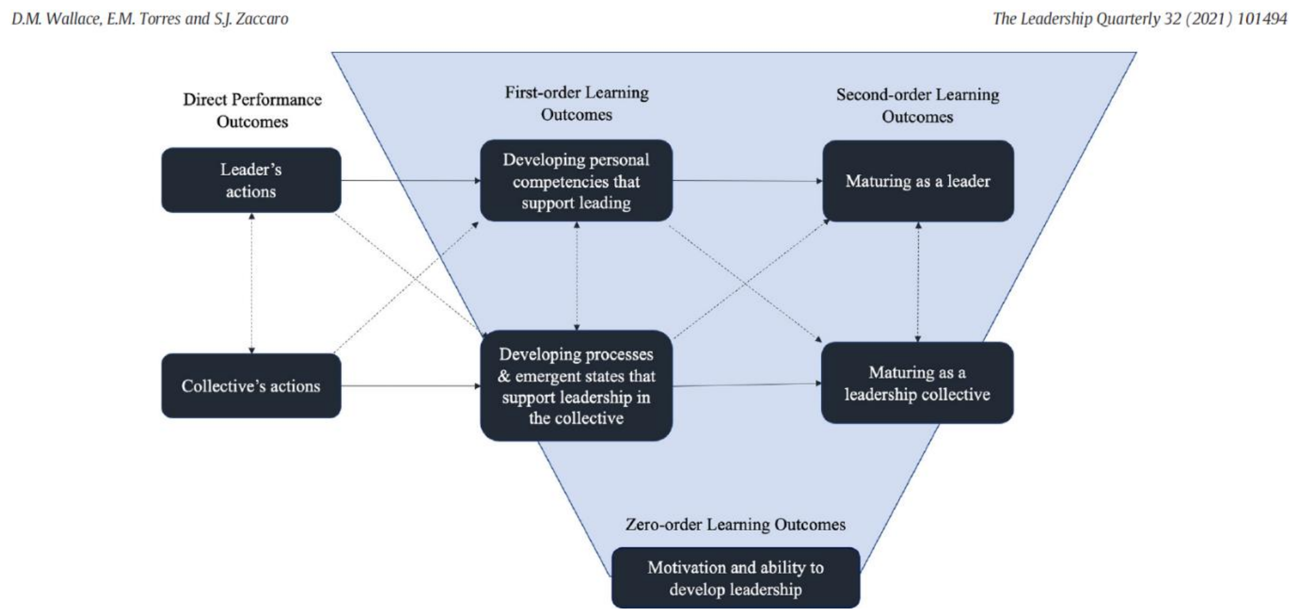


Figure 1

Multilevel summary framework of leadership development processes and outcomes. Abbreviation: KSAs, knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Figure A2: Wallace et al.'s (2021) leadership development model



APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER

What Do We Mean by Leadership?
A Call for Subject Matter Experts

Principal Investigator: Andrew McBride, M.A

Faculty Advisor: Janaki Gooty, Ph.D.

Study information

What does leadership mean?

What does it mean to be a good leader?

People often have answers to these questions before ever participating in a development program

Different people don't always agree either; certain meanings conflict with others

How might these different meanings impact the development process?

Your participation would involve…

A virtual or in-person interview

45 minutes of your time*

**On average. But if you only have 15 minutes, I'd still like to talk to you!*

Contact: Andrew (amcbrid7@uncc.edu) or Janaki (jgooty@uncc.edu)

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA CHARLOTTE

APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE FOR STUDY 2 FINDINGS

Table C1. Additional Evidence for LD Aggregate Dimensions

Aggregate Dimension (LD)	Additional Evidence
Emphasize Participant Agency	"The study emphasizes the importance of the development of self-regulation strategies to enable leaders to help themselves, i.e., help leaders to develop task-relevant competencies to enhance their own effectiveness as well as improving team performance." "At the individual level, an increased understanding of the self-view mechanisms and experience processing requires a focus on deliberate, conscious, and positive leader development practice (Day, 2010), as well as utilizing a growth mindset for development." "Therefore, future leader development programs could also consider incorporating feedback and narrative processes (Day et al., 2014), with an emphasis on helping program participants visualize themselves as occupying a leader role. As this self-view (or identity) becomes more developed and important, it should have a positive impact on program participants' behavior and emergence as leaders."
Include Experiential Learning	"Put a priority on work experience. Consistent with the research that individuals develop best through work experience, this was an effective approach to getting the attention and buy-in of the senior executives when the global high potential program was first rolled out." "Once in the organization, leadership development professionals in conjunction with global mobility professionals, when needed, should craft experiences with more developmental properties (i.e., those that are high-contact)." "One noteworthy direct application of this model of leader development is that assignments providing experience in solving complex organizational problems should contribute to skill development and performance, particularly in terms of requisite problem-solving and systems skills."
Context Must Support Development	"Organizations may further support these conditions by institutionalizing a team charter process whereby teams, upon their formation, collectively identify and agree upon a common goal and set of priorities, team roles and responsibilities, and team norms."

	"In addition, organizations might examine ways in which they can invoke or reinforce a learning orientation in individuals." "Although the formal development programs that we examined were not associated with better mentor networks, programs that incorporate senior managers as trainers may facilitate network development in a way similar to organizational socialization tactics that incorporate this serial feature."
Evaluate and Follow-Up	"Mechanisms must be designed for following up on development plans. While emphasis was made on getting people to prepare and discuss development plans, more work is needed to put in place mechanisms to track decisions, career moves, and other development activities." "Feedback from all stakeholders should be frequent and should aim at this development." "This can be accomplished by incorporating a suite of learning-oriented measures into the evaluation plan that assess change after developmental interventions. We encourage the use of both quantitative and qualitative assessments to track developmental changes in leader and leadership, as use of both forms of assessments may glean additional insights into the nature of development."
Use Various Development Strategies	"In particular, the results suggest that combinations or bundles of developmental experiences can have supplemental and synergistic effects. Formal training, challenging job responsibilities, and developmental supervision together will have the greatest potential consequences for developing leaders." "Drawing on alumnae networks/local businesses/workplace leaders to integrate mentoring into the program." "Fourth is the discovery that organizations, derived from a broad sample in terms of size and sector, which place a high priority on management development also pursue a wide range of formal, informal and external approaches. It is the sum total of this formal and informal activity which has a direct impact upon perceived success."

Create Alignment	"The leadership development strategy is most effective when it is aligned with other human resource practices. For example, the leadership profile -- a summary of the skills and capabilities of a global leader valued by the senior executives -- was used in succession planning and 360 feedback. Also, it was very effective to group executive staffing and the high potential program in the same organization. Staffing decisions could be made consistent with agreements for next assignments for the global high potentials." "Aligning all leader development offerings with the mission and values of the higher education institution/workplace." "Using this approach, we also suggested how to align policies and interventions with intrapersonal processes and highlighted what to target within employees as part of efforts to foster leader development."
Broaden Development Content	"Consult with others outside of your field to ensure the program is both evidence-based and practically relevant (e.g., if you are a practitioner, collaborate with an academic)." "Moreover, women's identity conflict may be reduced and their affective motivation to lead may be enhanced if organizations emphasize the characteristics of leaders that are compatible with women's self-schemas." "They also can provide dietary recommendations for sustaining adequate blood glucose levels as another means to preserve reserves of self-control for ethical leaders."

Table C2. Additional Evidence for LB Aggregate Dimensions

Aggregate Dimension (LB)	Additional Evidence
Increase Self-Awareness	"This includes helping leaders identify their own moral limitations and the moral strengths of others and ensuring that they know how to effectively seek out feedback from others about ethical issue." "For managers, these results suggest that there is an important relationship between their own personality traits and their tendencies toward certain upward influence tactics. These results may help managers rethink whether their use of certain tactics is based on their dispositions or the tactics they have observed to be the most successful in their organizations. Because behavioral tactics can be changed easier than dispositions, managers may benefit from greater awareness of the menu of tactics that is available to them, learning to enact more effective tactics even if it is not their initial tendency." "Second, help leaders identify and distinguish between less-than-optimal situation-encoding schemas and more optimal situation encoding schemas. This will help leaders become more conscious of their situation-encoding schemas and the quality of their current situation encoding schema profiles and it will help them identify areas for development and improvement."
Increase Knowledge	"Existing leadership development programs could be augmented with content that reviews the potential benefits of fulfilling subordinates' needs for leadership and the costs of failing to do so." "Our results suggest that leaders would be wise to become attuned to the moment-to-moment dynamics during team interactions. Leadership development could incorporate reflection components in this domain, in order to improve meeting leadership, team process management, and ultimately organizational effectiveness." "Similarly, as we show here, leaders may enact abusive behavior and perceive incivility not because they are terrible individuals, but because of situational primes. Awareness that power may motivate negative reactions toward others is the first step to self regulation; thus, leaders should be aware of the potential corrupting effects that power may have on them."

Match Behavior to Outcome	“Assuming that charismatic leadership is valued, managers might engage in proactive behaviors to enhance such perceptions, although not at the expense of in-role performance.” “Individuals, who wish to increase their impact inside and outside institutions, as well as between institutions, should consider using charismatic signaling as an additional means to gain social influence and emerge as opinion leaders when using social media.” “Our results reveal some well-supported benefits of EL for individuals and teams. In particular, they suggest that such leadership may be especially useful in enhancing OCB and creativity. Thus, organizations that particularly require employees to be creative and engage in OCB should consider EL as a means to achieving this.”
Match Behavior to Context	“Also, development programs can help make leaders aware that their behavior may lead to different reactions depending on the personality of their subordinate. More carefully monitoring of their autocratic behavior especially toward followers who are more neurotic may again help reduce follower burnout.” “Effective leaders must keep in mind that leading specialized teams may require them to more frequently defer to their teams, as the risk of harmful overruling increases with subordinate expertise. Further, faulty overruling may be seen as a psychological contract breach, leading to distrust, and harming commitment.” “It might also be valuable to encourage leaders to recognize insecure attachment styles amongst their employees so that they can particularly target their support efforts to these individuals.”
Create Environmental Alignment	“Knowing about the joint effect of leader power and benevolence can have implications for organizations' selection procedures. Organizations aiming for a supporting and nurturing environment may choose to select leaders who are high on both sets of values.” “Practitioners should also realize that high rewards for individual-focused goals could further deteriorate these negative relations to collective outcomes. Therefore, companies should try to avoid having too many individualized-focused goals set in place, for instance, by avoiding an overly individual- focused incentive structure.”

	“In terms of organizational development, various organizational policies and practices can be incorporated into the organization's culture, either in performance management or continuous improvement initiatives that reward seeking negative feedback, sharing expertise, and attaining shared goals in individual, team, and departmental learning (Dweck, 2006).”
Train and Enact Consistent Behaviors	“The results of this study demonstrate that a resourceful work environment, as created by transformational leaders, is an important prerequisite for an employee to be engaged. The transformational style of the supervisor seems to be highly important, because it boosts employees' optimism and in turn enhances their work engagement. Thus, it might be worthwhile for organizations to invest in transformational leadership training for their leaders.” “Hence, team leaders must both ‘talk the talk’ and ‘walk the walk.’ That is, the organization should explicitly encourage team leaders to consider the ethical performance of employees when making performance assessments.” “Leadership training is also needed in order to assist leaders in developing servant leadership behaviors in order to shape employees’ shared beliefs in the team’s general effectiveness. Therefore, organizations should train leaders to encourage followers to provide service to their teams by developing such behaviors as healing, performing ethically, and empowering.”

Table C3. Additional Evidence for Practitioner Aggregate Dimensions

Aggregate Dimension (Practitioner)	**Additional Evidence**
Creating the "Enlightened" Leader	"Develop leaders people choose to follow." "Building Relationship Versatility provides participants with results-oriented versatility skills that help them improve their ability to work effectively with others. Individuals are better able to build productive relationships, handle conflict, and create more focused and productive teams." "Lasting behavior change comes from the inside out. Who people are, and how they view the world, impacts how they engage and lead others. Our…Journeys combine our exclusive content, expert consultants, and powerful technology to help people change both their mindset and their behavior."
Creating Practical Outcomes	"Networking for Success shows employees how to build effective business networks. Participants learn how to evaluate the effectiveness of their networking efforts, how to make meaningful contacts, how to enter existing groups, and how to demonstrate their competence and character. Networking for Success empowers employees to comfortably and effectively approach the people they need to—those who are most likely to become good business contacts." "RESULT: Leaders and teams deliver exceptional business results in a virtuous cycle of engagement, productivity, and innovation." "The result? Better leaders who get better business results."
Creating Strategic Leaders	"See their purpose and connect it with key business goals." "Business Execution: Develop leaders who can translate strategy into meaningful action that moves your business forward." "Use the links below to find out how collaborating with us will liberate the potential of your leaders so they can take your organization to new places."

Can Help Any Organization	"Leaders at every level have unique learning needs. Explore how you can create leadership development programs that provide consistency across levels yet are tailored to the unique learning needs of each group." "Most importantly, we build all our content on proven foundational models and concepts. That way, you can easily mix and match to create blended learning journeys that meet your leaders in the moment, while maintaining consistency." "Agile design and execution: Your dedicated…team is fast, flexible and able to iterate. It's what enables us to understand your context and generate results more quickly."
Creates Real Organizational Impact	"Value driven: We prioritize the mindset and behavior shifts that drive value in an organization. We ground learnings in the business context by linking to real challenges and incorporating work on real problems." "We base our approach to development on 50 years of science and research on the practice of leadership." "Measure and evolve: We track program impact from participant experience to return on investment and continually iterate and innovate for maximum impact."