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Research Review and Notes

Lawrence Technological University 'Leaders in the Making': An Effective Leader is a Learning Leader

This article examines survey data on leadership from university students and alumni to characterize effective leadership using Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR. We define learning leaders as leaders who use lifelong learning, dialogue and collaborative communication to lead self and others through leveraging strengths, identifying opportunities and aspirations, and being results-driven and present recommendations for how to be a learning leader.

The purpose of this article is to consider an effective leader as an individual who is a learning leader. The article examines the phenomena of leaders as learning leaders. We see learning leaders as curious about leading their own lives and leading others by focusing on positive imagery and possibilities. Learning leaders use dialogue and a collaborative communication style to lead others, through leveraging strengths, identifying opportunities and aspirations of self and others, and being results-driven (SOAR¹-based possibilities).

This article presents results of a study on leadership in over 300 students and over 300 alumni from Lawrence Technological University (LTU) in Southfield, Michigan. Our study was designed to learn about respondents' perceptions of fifteen dimensions of effective leadership organized in three areas: lifelong learning, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and SOAR. Study results found that students and alumni perceive an effective leader to be a person who is focused on lifelong learning, one who embraces leadership from the foundation of AI and its five core principles (Constructionist, Simultaneity, Poetic, Anticipatory and Positive),

¹ Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results



and who leads from a SOAR-based framework. We believe these results define a learning leader.

We begin with a review of the literature on leadership and learning styles to support our proposition that an effective leader is a learning leader. Next, we describe LTU’s commitment to cultivate “leaders in the making” across all its colleges. Finally, we review the study results, focusing on the major characteristics of an effective leader as defined by students and alumni. We conclude with a discussion of what makes a learning leader, and present practical recommendations for leading effectively as a learning leader.

Reviewing the literature on leadership and learning styles

Leadership is an ageless topic. We learned the origins of the term “leader” goes back to 1250 and “leadership” to 1815 (dictionary.com). Our initial searches found over 35,000 books to choose from Amazon.com alone, and hundreds of thousands of articles to read with a quick Google search. In our search of the terms “leader” and “leadership styles”, most of the literature we found centered on how to become a leader, how to develop leaders, best styles of leadership, or best ways to lead. We went through two major leadership text books (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 2012; Humphrey, 2014) and learned that there are over 39 documented styles on leadership (summarized in Table 1). We did not find “Learning Leader” or “Learning Leadership” as a documented style of leadership.

Table 1. Leadership styles found in the scholarly/practitioner literature

Achievement leadership	Empowerment leadership	Relational leadership
Altruistic leadership	Entrepreneurial leadership	Reflective leadership
Appreciative leadership	Evidence-based leadership	Resonant leadership
Authentic leadership	Face-to-face leadership	Self-leadership
Autocratic leadership	Global leadership	Self-protective leadership
Bureaucratic Leadership	Humane-oriented leadership	Servant leadership
Charismatic leadership	Humble leadership	Shared leadership
Community leadership	Laissez-faire leadership	Situational leadership
Consideration leadership	Mindful leadership	Social-emotional leadership
Crisis leadership	Participative leadership	Strategic leadership
Democratic leadership	Peer leadership	Task leadership
Directive leadership	Positive leadership	Transactional leadership
Distributed leadership	Pragmatic leadership	Transformational leadership



We then conducted another search of the literature and narrowed our search terms to “learning leader”, “learning leaders” and “learning leadership”. Once again, we found articles primarily concerned with learning about leadership or learning about how to be a leader. We did find the 2001 paper “Exploring the

*Effective leaders learn from
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Relationships between Learning and Leadership” by Lillas M. Brown and Barry Posner, which surveyed 312 managerial leaders from a management development course and an MBA executive program on how people learn and how people lead at the turn of the new millennium, a time considered as turbulent and challenging as today (Brown and Posner, 2001).

Leaders as high action learners

Results of our literature review suggest effective leaders learn from visioning, communicating, trusting others and positive self-regard (Bennis and Nanus, 1997), and also that effective leaders learn through “challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart” (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, 323). Brown and Posner, in particular, found that effective leaders thrive on the “challenge of change, who can foster environments of innovation, who encourage trust and collaboration, and who are prepared to chart a course into uncharted territories” (Brown and Posner, 2001, 275). They also found effective leaders are labeled “high action learners” engaged in “leadership behaviors like challenging, inspiring, enabling, modeling, and encouraging” (278).

Brown and Posner’s (2001) seminal study and our study are both interested in understanding and connecting learning and leadership to the development of effective leaders through key concepts in leadership that will “accelerate and enhance strategic thinking and other equally critical and complex capabilities” (279). While Brown and Posner consider the intersection between learning and leadership through the lens of transformational leadership, we consider this intersection through key concepts in AI and SOAR.

As shown in Table 2, AI and SOAR share key concepts in dialogue, reflection, relationships and systems thinking that align with transformational learning theory. While AI helps leaders inspire others by helping them see the positives (what is best) in themselves and their contributions (Schiller, Holland, and Riley, 2001), SOAR provides a framework for leaders to nurture a collaborative dialogue between leader and follower through shared understanding and a commitment to action via strengths-based and opportunity-focused inquiry with a focus on aspirations and desired results (Stavros and Cole, 2013). We consider SOAR as a framework for creating a reservoir of positivity to frame issues from an AI, solution-oriented perspective that generates collaborative dialogue for leaders to focus on new ideas, innovations and encouraging the best in people to emerge (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008; Stavros and Wooten, 2012). In the present study, we explore key characteristics of effective leaders from the perspective of a learning leader by asking “What is an effective leader?” and “Do characteristics of an effective leader align with the meaning of AI, its

five core principles and SOAR?” Our results suggest an effective leader is best characterized by leadership qualities that are indicative of a learning leader.

Table 2. Key concepts in Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR

Appreciative Inquiry/SOAR	Transformational Learning Theory
Experience: High point or peak	Experience: High point or peak
Best of past reflection	Critical reflection
Appreciative learning cultures	Affective learning
Dialogue	Dialogue
Relationships based on support and trust	Relationships based on support and trust
Learning from self and others	Learning from self and others
Individual and whole-system development	Individual development
Whole-systems thinking	Open systems thinking

Lawrence Technological University

Lawrence Technological University is a private university located in Southfield, Michigan in the Detroit metropolitan area and founded in 1932. Today, LTU has a diverse student body of over 4,000 students across its four colleges, with over 100 undergraduate and graduate programs. LTU promotes its students as “leaders in the making” through its mission to develop innovative and agile leaders via a student-centric learning environment and applied research embracing theory and practice. LTU focuses on leadership development through its program curricula that teach leadership skills, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, positive change, diversity and the commitment to lifelong learning. Given that the learning environment of LTU is focused on developing leaders, LTU is well-suited as a case study for exploring effective leaders as learning leaders.

Study methods and results

We surveyed over 600 participants (student and alumni) in our study using an original online survey, asking respondents about their perceptions of effective leadership. The online survey was comprised of open-ended questions such as “What defines an effective leader” and “What defines a learning leader”. The survey also contained a series of fifteen dichotomous slider questions to learn if characteristics of an effective leader align with lifelong learning, AI and SOAR. These questions contained a statement anchored with two opposing statements, and respondents moved a slider anywhere along the continuum between the two anchors. For example, the statement “Effective leadership involves...” was anchored by “status quo of how things are now” vs. “lifelong learning”.

The study sample was comprised of equal numbers of students and alumni (see Table 3). Over two-thirds of the sample was comprised of current undergraduate students or alumni who had earned an undergraduate degree (see Table 3).

Results of thematic analysis on the responses to the open-ended question “What defines an effective leader” found that they defined an effective leader as being confident, with future vision, aspirational, appreciative, dialogical, inspirational, empathic, finding solutions and with integrity (see Figure 1). Thematic analysis on the responses to the open-ended question “What defines a learning leader” found a learning leader is defined by lifelong learning, dialogue, AI’s core principles and SOAR (see Figure 2). Results of the dichotomous slider questions suggest respondents prefer effective leader characteristics that are aligned with lifelong learning, AI and SOAR (see Figure 3).

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of study sample

Status, Gender, Age	Students (% of total, N = 330)	Alumni (% of total, N = 334)
Undergrad	77.3	66.5
Grad	22.7	33.5
Female	42.4	26.9
Male	50.6	70.4
14-18	11.5	0.0
19-22	50.6	0.9
23-32	23.6	27.8
33-64	9.4	55.1
65+	0.0	13.2

Figure 1. Results of open-ended question on what defines an effective leader

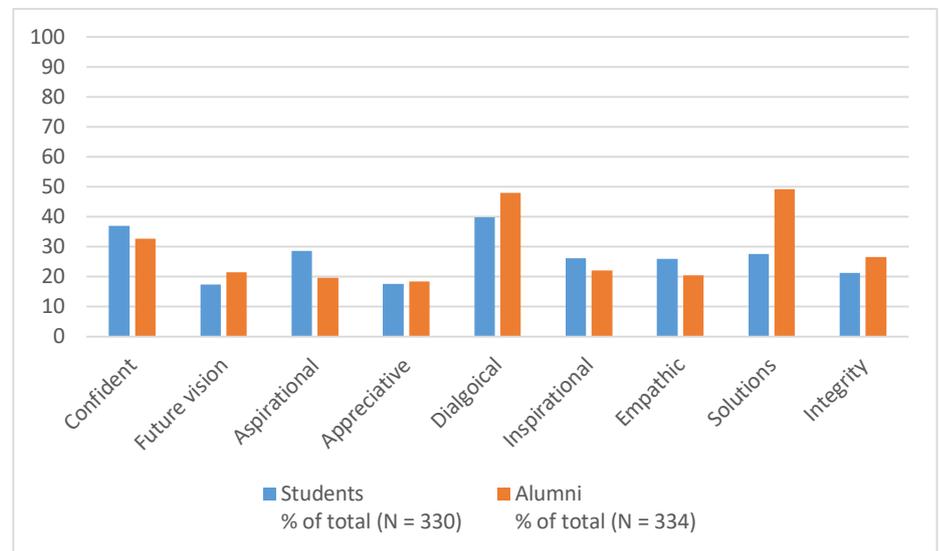


Figure 2. Results of open-ended question on what defines a learning leader

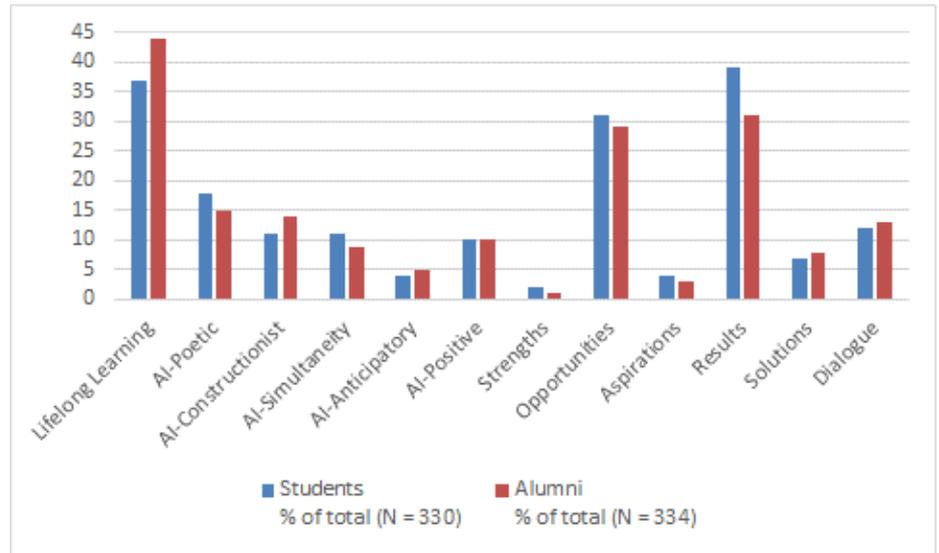
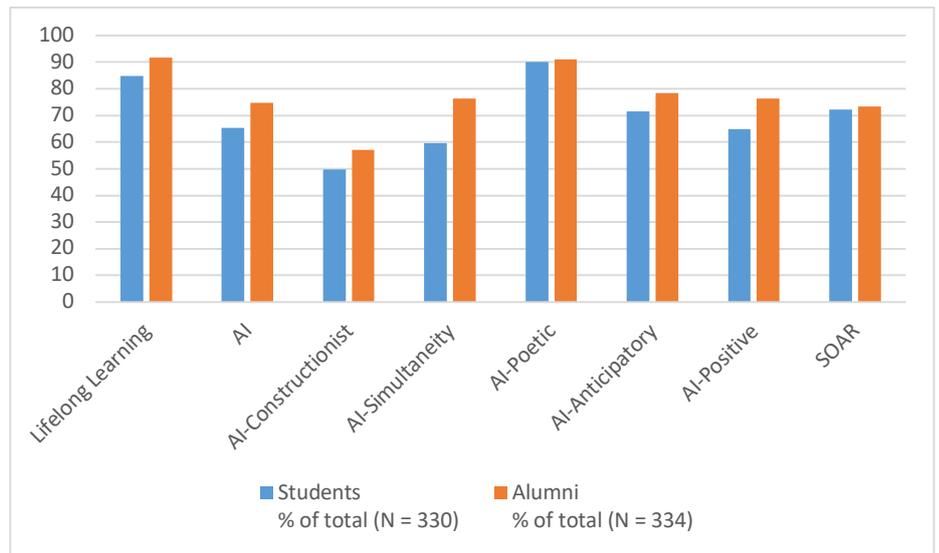


Figure 3. Results of Slider Questions on Effective Leader Characteristics Aligned with Lifelong Learning, AI, and SOAR.



We found that an effective leader is a learning leader, characterized by lifelong learning, AI and SOAR.

Discussion

The world-renowned scholar on leaders and leadership, John Kotter, refers to a leader as one who can motivate and inspire others through “a process that helps direct and mobilize people and their ideas” (Kotter, 1990, 3). Kotter suggests a leader is effective when he/she helps others learn by assisting them to higher levels of personal and professional achievements. In our study of effective leadership in students and alumni from LTU, we found that an effective leader is a learning leader, characterized by lifelong learning, AI and SOAR. We also found that literature and empirical research on learning leaders is scarce. Our study presents a starting point in exploring both the meaning of a learning leader and the relationship between learning leader and AI.

The most effective leaders are insatiably focused on and curious about effectively developing followers' strengths.

Our participants were asked “Please list some recommendations for creating an effective leader”. Given our study results that an effective leader is a learning leader, the following list can be considered recommendations for how to be a learning leader:

- Telling others what they are doing right
- Encouraging followers to be leaders in their own right
- Communicating, listening, and asking for opinions and ideas
- Treating everyone with respect and appreciation
- Helping people grow
- Acting with understanding, empathy, respect and integrity
- Helping individuals overcome their weaknesses by improving their strengths
- Understanding what people’s strengths are to put them in the best position possible
- Being a continual learner by researching leadership methods and learning about yourself as a leader



In the best-selling book *Strengths-Based Leadership*, Rath and Conchie (2008) said the most effective leaders are insatiably focused on and curious about effectively developing followers’ strengths, and the most effective leaders communicate regularly with followers. David Cooperrider interviewed Peter Drucker, who said “the task of leadership is to align strengths to make weaknesses irrelevant”. Our study results support the sentiments of Rath, Conchie and Drucker on effective leadership and describe what we propose are the essential characteristics of learning leaders. We see learning leaders as leaders who use lifelong learning, dialogue and collaborative communication to lead their own lives and lead others

Learning leaders leverage strengths, identify opportunities and aspirations, and are results-driven.

through leveraging strengths, identifying opportunities and aspirations of self and others, and being results-driven.

In conclusion, this article addresses one aspect of learning leaders by studying the survey responses from a seminal study with a sample of students and alumni from Lawrence Technological University whose mission is to develop lifelong learners and cultivate leadership capabilities. More research can be done to develop a deeper understanding of the characteristics of learning leaders at LTU and other universities and in other populations at universities, including staff, faculty and administrators. More research is also needed on the characteristics of learning leaders, specifically from an AI- and SOAR-based perspective in a variety of contexts, organizations and age cohorts – especially those who claim in their missions that learning and leadership are important to stakeholders.

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