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## Walking Our Evidence-Based Talk: The Case of Leadership Development in Business Schools

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### Synopsis

Academics have lamented that practitioners do not always adopt scientific evidence in their work, yet they do not always practice it themselves. Specifically, leader development programs (LDPs) are widely used but often critiqued for lacking evidence. Analysing 60 interviews with academic directors of leadership centres, we find that LDPs do not always align with scientific recommendations nor are rigorously evaluated. Respondents indicated a variety of challenges explaining this disconnect between claiming A but practicing B. In line with research on behavioral integrity we find that the lack of a clear and salient identity makes it difficult for academics to walk their evidence-based leader development talk.

### Introduction and Background

Leader development can be defined as “the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (Day & Dragoni, 2015, p. 134) and is estimated to be a 140 billion US dollars industry globally (Mercer, 2019), an amount that is expected to continue to rise (CCL, 2019). A content analysis of mission statements of top business schools indicates that the majority sees leader development as critical and central to their mission and curricula (Kniffin

et al., 2020). In this massive market for leader development (Schwartz et al., 2014), business schools can make a unique selling proposition of being evidence-based. While the broader market seems to be flooded with “fads and fashions” (Simons, 1999) that may hold great promise but often lack evidence in support of their effectiveness, universities are institutions of research, thus they can claim that programs they offer are based on what has been shown to “work” (i.e., are effective at developing leaders). Yet, it is not clear that this is indeed the case.

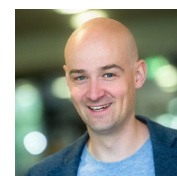
### Issues and Questions Considered

Our goal was to examine the extent to which business schools live up to the promise of “leader development that works.” While business schools may be uniquely positioned to produce better leaders (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2019), some have questioned whether they are truly as evidence based as would be expected from academic institutions (DeRue et al., 2011; Klimoski & Amos, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015; Vermeulen, 2011). For instance, LDPs are not always taught by experts with relevant academic training (e.g., Charlier et al., 2011); they continue to use popular tools (e.g., Myers–Briggs Type Indicator [MBTI]) that have little academic base (Grant, 2013); and

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are often not rigorously evaluated, focusing on student satisfaction (Kaiser & Curphy, 2013; Pfeffer, 2015; Tews & Noe, 2019) rather than, for instance, demonstrating behavioral change. Thus, we set out to answer two research questions: (1) To what extent are business schools' LDPs evidence based? and (2) What drives academics to disengage from evidence-based LD?

## Methodology

To better understand the current state of quality standards of leader development in business schools and its causes, we interviewed 60 academic directors of leadership centres from top-ranked business schools around the world (as determined by the Financial Times top 100 MBA World Ranking in 2019). Each academic director had a significant track record in publishing leadership research as well in teaching in LDPs. The interviews focused around our two research questions, first asking interviewees about the curricula of LDPs at their school (cross-referencing and complementing with information found on the leadership centre websites and additional documentation that was provided by interviewees). Then we asked centre directors about the factors that drive the (lack of) adoption of evidence-based leadership development.

## Outcomes and Findings

To answer RQ1, we examined the extent to which evidence is incorporated into LDPs both on the selection-side (i.e., adopting up-to-date research on effective leadership and leader-development in designing the program's content) and the evaluation-side (i.e., assessing the outcomes of the program). Our analysis yielded a mixed picture, showing that LDPs were not fully evidence based. For example, a little over a quarter of programs (28.30%) employed concepts, models, and measures which research clearly demonstrates are outdated (e.g., MBTI; Grant, 2013). Second, while many schools used evidence-based methods (such as 360-degree feedback), the conditions under which a method/program was offered did not align with the best practices for implementation (e.g., not targeting specific learning goals or insufficient support in interpreting the feedback). Looking at evaluation of programs revealed that although evidence-based practices were implemented in most of the programs, 70% of programs did not assess outcomes and effectiveness, but rather focused on student satisfaction (i.e., smile-sheets). Additionally, the majority

of interviewees (63.33%) described using assessments as a part of their program or other ratings of one's leadership (self and other report; 23.3%), however, these were characterized as 'assurance of learning', and were not used to assess the effectiveness of the program itself. Thus, we found that some aspects of LDPs are indeed evidence-based, however, programs as a whole, are not.

In exploring RQ2, we found that while centre directors were motivated to make LDPs evidence-based, they were faced with various challenges when attempting to do that. They described overly broad definitions for what constitutes leadership and its development as a first challenge. For example, encountering many programs at their school that were labelled as 'leader development' but in fact are not, and were presented as such due to the popularity of the construct of leadership and its appeal to students and industry. Second, interviewees identified challenges with underdeveloped and underappreciated knowledge base on leader development. For example, there is much more work on effective leadership than on its development, and even when such knowledge exists, it suffers from under-exposure, so they may not be aware of it. Third, interviewees identified alternative organizational reasons competing with evidence-based practice, such as having little institutional support for making LDPs more evidence-based and competing incentives (e.g., making students happy versus facilitating their growth). Finally, lack of quality of external monitoring for leader development programs was identified as a barrier as well, stating that insufficient external incentives (e.g., lack of accreditation for LDPs) were among such factors that undermined interviewees' intent or ability to make LDPs more evidence based.

We also considered what underpins these four challenges. Although these factors are unique to some extent, they are also interconnected. For example, it is difficult to have external standards of leadership development (i.e., accreditation) if people do not agree on what leader development entails. Considering the interconnection between these key challenges, we identified a lack of evidence-based leader developer identity, as a root cause of the four challenges. Such identity was absent from many interviews or involved unclarity as to what it means to hold such identity. Creating a community that would facilitate individual and collective identities can be key to supporting leader developers in making LDPs more evidence-based and ensuring the effectiveness of leader development programs.

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Forthcoming Research Bulletin

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