

Preparing Agricultural Leaders for the Modern Era: Leadership Programs, Evolving Leadership Discourses, and Participants' Sense of Self

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Introduction/Need for Research

Adult leadership development programs (ALDP) often take a grass roots, networked approach to preparing the agricultural community for the challenges of our modern world. These programs' leadership development efforts focus on fostering new partnerships and generating collaborative solutions for the agricultural community. However, while ALDP aspirations are admirable, in order to ensure that programs are addressing modern agricultural challenges, we need to know more about programs' success in promoting the collaborative community leadership associated with modern leadership discourses, such as the emergent eco-leader discourse (Kaufman, Rateau, Carter, & Strickland, 2012). Such insight will help guide local leadership capacity building efforts for the modern era, which aligns with the American Association for Agricultural Education's research priority for vibrant, resilient communities (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

As the challenges society faces have changed, so too have the ways in which we engage in leadership to address them. Through a meta-analysis of historical, socio-political, and economic perspectives in leadership literature, Western (2010, 2013) has identified four discourses of leadership occurring during the last century (Figure 1). The current, emergent discourse, eco-leader, is a break from the previous discourses of leadership. Throughout the 20th century, leadership was most often predicated on the capacity for centralized control vested in a positional leader within a bounded system; however, the eco-leader discourse sees leadership not as the effect of an individual, but, rather, a collective, collaborative process (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). In this current discourse, the role of leadership is viewed as bringing together people, ideas, and organizational structures so that organizations can develop strategies to address adaptive challenges, like those in the agricultural sector (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1999; Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005).

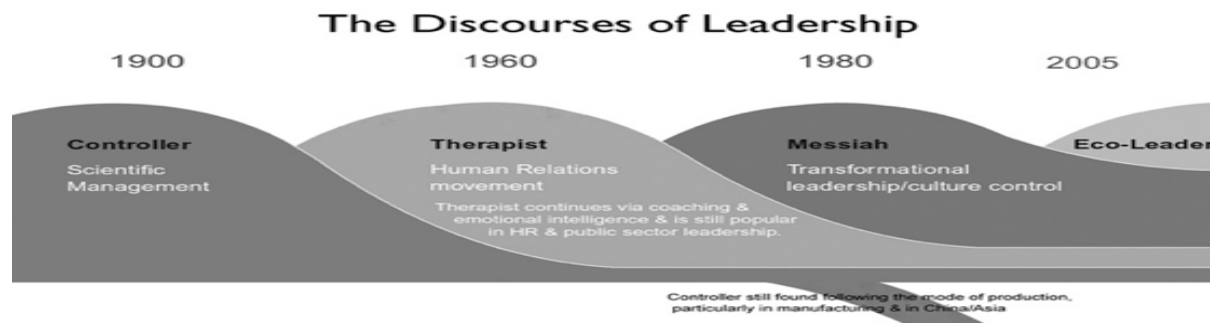


Figure 1. Approximate timeline of leadership discourses. From *Leadership: A Critical Text* (p. 82), by S. Western, 2007, Thousand Oaks: SAGE. Copyright 2007 by SAGE Publications.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Participants were comprised of current and past (within two years) participants in a statewide ALDP. The first, quantitative strand utilized the Western Indicator of Leadership Discourse (WILD) questionnaire to determine 23 participants' preferred leadership discourse; participants' personality assessment data collected as part of the ALDP was also used, including

Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Instrument (TKI). Once participants identified their preferred discourse, a second, qualitative strand utilized extreme-case interviews to allow nine participants the opportunity to elucidate their discourse preference, views on leadership, and impact of the program on their views. Interviews were conducted via phone, recorded, transcribed, and coded using the constant comparative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

The WILD questionnaire revealed participants ($n=23$) had a near-even preference for the eco-leader ($m=29.52$) and therapist ($m=29.52$) discourses. Closely following was the messiah discourse ($m=24.13$), and the least preferred discourse was controller ($m=17.26$). Several statistically significant relationships were found between leadership discourse preference and other personality assessments. Preference for eco-leader was highly positively correlated with the MBTI score for introversion. Participants who preferred the eco-leader discourse were also positively correlated with the TKI rank for collaborating.

The qualitative strand emerged five themes: (a) effective leaders promote collaborative environments; (b) effective leaders promote committed followership; (c) effective leaders value relationships; (d) positional leader do not have all the answers; (e) ALDP participants gain knowledge of self and others.

Conclusions

Participants' WILD scores help to characterize their leadership outlook and give insight to their potential success for providing leadership in the agricultural community. First, participants' preference for the eco-leader discourse indicates that these agricultural leaders may conceive of agricultural organizations as "a web of connections, networks that operate like ecosystems" rather than bounded systems, and, further, that they view their role as a leader to bring together people, ideas, and organizational structures to address adaptive challenges (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1999; Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005; Western, 2013, p. 245). This is distinct from a more traditional leader who seeks positional authority to effect change through articulating a vision or issuing directives. Also, it may well be the behind-the-scenes nature of the eco-leader that makes it so attractive to introverts. Second, participants' near-even preference for the therapist discourse indicates these leaders also invest in people, relationships, and human development. The archetypical therapist leader "listens, cares and encourages, and is usually a leader who is liked and admired, because they understand, praise and support, and stand by their people" (Western, 2013, p. 212). This is corroborated by the qualitative findings' themes of: (a) effective leaders value relationships, and (b) effective leaders promote committed followership.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on the Profession

Western's (2013) four leadership discourses provide a useful framework for discussing leadership trends in the agricultural sector, assessing ALDP participants' views on leadership, and measuring the change in participants' views as a result of the program. Perhaps more importantly, it offers a means for leadership development programs to assess their own inherent discourse preference, surface those assumptions, and more purposefully design leadership programs to help participants succeed in the modern era. This could also be applicable for undergraduate leadership programs. Indeed, based on this study, one recommendation is for ALDP and other programs to periodically evaluate their underlying assumptions (i.e., discourse) informing their programming and assess if the product continues to serve the participant well.

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