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FROM THE EDITORS

PUTTING THE SCIENCE BENEATH THE PRACTICE: ADVANCING THEORY IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Clearly, leadership matters. By leadership, we mean the social influence process that impacts the thoughts, feelings, actions and performance of individuals or groups (Yukl, 2010; 2020). Whether in sports (Clare, Hardy, Roberts, Tod & Benson, 2025), classrooms (Shen, Wu, Reeves, Zheng, Ryan & Anderson, 2020), or companies (Wang, Holmes, Oh & Zhu, 2016), leadership has impact. Not only does leadership make a difference, but it can be developed through means such as training (Lacerenza, Reyes, Marlow, Joseph & Salas, 2017), life and work experiences (McCall, Lombardo & Morrison, 1988), and feedback (Smither, London & Reilly, 2005). Moreover, we have evidence that different aspects of leadership can develop: for instance, individual leadership styles (Antonakis, Fenley, Liechti, 2011; Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa & Chan, 2009), leaders' self-views, cognitions, emotions, knowledge and competence (Day & Sin, 2011; Dragoni, Park, Soltis & Forte-Trammell, 2014; Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang & Avolio, 2011; Lord & Hall, 2005), as well as the collective leadership capacity in teams (Aime, Humphrey, DeRue & Paul, 2014; DeRue, Nahrgang & Ashford, 2015). In short, the field of leadership has accumulated compelling evidence to conclude that leadership is both important and *can* be developed.

While 75 years of research on leadership has yielded important insights, it remains unclear *how* leadership *should* be developed. There is no consensus on the theoretical framing or mechanisms that should be used to optimize leadership development interventions or even the outcomes of interest, for instance. This lack of theoretical clarity comes at a cost: researchers and practitioners remain ill-equipped to build theoretically grounded process models and frameworks that can reliably guide how to develop leadership. Money is poured into leadership development programs that have theoretically questionable grounding, and hence likely little practical benefit (Beer, 2016).

It follows that our collective lack of theoretical clarity stalls scientific progress and squanders opportunities to apply scientifically-backed approaches to developing leadership in practice. The aim of this special issue is, therefore, to theoretically advance our scientific and practical understanding of leadership development by better describing how leadership should develop. Our broader aspiration for this special issue is to contribute to the building of a more comprehensive and cohesive theory-based field of leadership development, and the learning behind it, to aid scientists and practitioners alike in making informed intervention choices. For this reason, *Academy of Management Learning & Education* is a natural choice to feature this collection of new leadership development theories because its readers include scholars and practitioners, and it focuses on understanding learning and the benefits learning can bring to prospective leaders, teams, and organizations.

We applied Whetten's (1989) six classic questions designed to elicit greater theoretical clarity and consistency to the area of leadership development to craft this "From the Editors" (FTE) piece. You may think of these questions—What? How? When? Who? Why? Where?—as the building blocks for how leadership development theory, research, and practice should be created, designed, and implemented. Each of the following sections features one of these questions. Within each section, we first describe how someone seeking to build a leadership development theory, empirical study, or intervention might answer the focal theory-building question to achieve greater theoretical clarity. In addition, within each section we introduce one or two papers from this special issue that are exemplars for how the focal question could be addressed. Finally, in each section we conclude with our observations of the shortcomings in practice that may result from fuzzy theoretical specification of the focal question (see Table 1).

With this strategy in mind, we hope to not only introduce and highlight the importance of the papers contained in this special issue, but also equip those who study leadership development *and* those who have adjacent interests (e.g., power, status, voice, teams, organizational change, etc.) to develop testable and usable theories on the many facets that contribute to leadership development.

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TABLE 1
Key Considerations in Constructing Your Leadership Development Theory

Question	Why This Question is Important	Potential Answers from Topical Research	Exemplars within the SI
1. What? What precise identity, value, attitude, skill, ... do you aim to develop?	*Pedagoogling*: Last minute compilation of long, unfocused, and incoherent list of learning objectives.	Construct precision (e.g., conceptual clarity, nomological network, discriminant validity).	Nieberle, Braun, Epitropaki, Bysh, and Morgan (2026)
2. How? How can you best cultivate that one key aspect?	*Edutainment*: Focus on entertaining ideas and hope they stick.	Construct manipulation (e.g., experimental, field intervention, antecedents).	Detert and McKee (2026)
3. When? When will development realistically occur?	*Insta-training*: Assume development materializes right after intervention.	Construct complexity and malleability (e.g., causal timing, event-based, experience sampling, longitudinal).	Petriglieri (2026)
4. Who? Who are the participants and how can you best reach them?	*Hammer problem:* To a hammer everything looks like a nail.	Personal variation (e.g., individual moderators, qualitative studies).	Ashford, Wellman, and Sweeten (2026) Vassolo, Weisz, Rivarola, Willi, Coraiola, and Cornejo (2026)
5. Why? Why should the proposed development of the targeted leadership area work as intended?	*Preach to choir*: Targeting developmental as a personal mission, preaching to those who already believe.	Process variation (e.g., moderated mediations, process or narrative qualitative studies).	Palanski and Barclay (2026)
6. Where? Embed development in a broader ecosystem of influence?	*The bubble of training*: Developing skills without connecting to the larger system.	Situational variation (e.g., situational moderators, multilevel research, qualitative case studies).	Guthey and Ferry (2026) McMillan, Haslam, Mitchell, Steffens, and Peters (2026)

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE CREATION OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Before beginning our discussion of each theory-building question, we note an important consideration. We acknowledge that even though each paper featured in this special issue is associated with one focal question in this FTE piece, the special issue papers represent helpful examples on how to address several of the theory-building questions presented, not just one. Our more parsimonious introduction is meant to clarify the meaning and application of each question. The reality that the papers contained in this issue address multiple building blocks of sound theory reveals that achieving theoretical specificity in one area (e.g., *How* is leadership developed?) inspires specificity in other ones (e.g., *Who* is most likely to develop?). Moreover, these theory-building questions are intertwined in reality to produce nuanced theory. For instance, theories and interventions focused on different audiences (*Who*?) will likely point to different indicators of development (*What*?), theoretical rationales for *why* leadership should develop, associated timeframes (*When*?), mechanisms responsible for inspiring growth (*How*?) and the types of jobs, organizations, and so on *where* such growth will be supported and flourish. Our point is that sound theory weaves together answers to these foundational theory-building questions in a coherent manner to create a snapshot of the complex phenomenon of leadership development.

Q1. *What* Precise Identity, Value, Skill, … Do You Aim to Develop?

A starting point to think about leadership development is to define the concept space—what exact element of leadership are you focused on developing? Precision in theory and concept definition are hallmarks of good scientific research, which was promoted in one of the most highly cited research books published in the last 60 years (Kuhn, 1962). Kuhn clarified for researchers that defining what is and is not under consideration has implications for the quality of the theory and any subsequent empirical research. Kuhn's assertion is good advice for us. It means that we need to be explicit about what exactly we are predicting will change—whether it be an individual characteristic (e.g., political skill, using promotive voice), a team capability (e.g., ability to adapt to change) or an organizational quality (e.g., greater alignment in shared goals during a strategic change).

A recent review of 274 interventions across 15 behavioral science mega-studies confirmed Kuhn's and our point—the specificity of the outcome mattered most for change to actually occur (Patel, Goldwert, Constantino & Vlasceanu, 2026).

In this special issue, Nieberle and colleagues (2026) exemplify theoretical precision. These authors take one of most popular frameworks of leadership development centered on leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and theorize about the kinds of multiple identities involved in the development of a person's leader identity. They differentiate between singular, dual, and plural configurations for identity development—arguing that the developmental goals, developmental processes, and developmental outcomes should differ fundamentally between these different developmental targets to optimize leadership development. Thus, these authors offer a well-defined "what" by precisely defining the aspect of leadership predicted to develop.

Shifting our focus to practice, when the question of "what" is poorly answered, it can result in vague, excessive, or irrelevant learning objectives—or what we refer to as *pedagoogling* (combining pedagogy and googling). According to training experts (Noe, 2020), well-crafted learning objectives direct the intervention's design, methods, and timing of key instructional events, such as practice. Without this precision in the learning outcomes, the practitioner risks relying on methods and instructional events that are not well-suited to growing the participants' most needed leadership skill or competency. For this reason, we recommend that scholars and practitioners must first zero in on *the one aspect of leadership* designated for growth.

Q2. *How* Can You Best Cultivate That One Key Aspect?

After the "what" is defined (Q1), scholars must then specify "how" their chosen area of leadership will develop. In other words, the mechanism(s) through which development is activated needs to be articulated. To answer this question, we encourage adopting an "experimental mindset"—that is, a disciplined focus on describing the manipulation thought to meaningfully change the focal area of leadership while considering how best to handle confounding processes (Stark, Tröster & Van Quaquebeke, 2026). Existing experimental research on the focal outcome variable may provide clues about the mechanism(s) that encourage, or even accelerate, leadership development.

To produce sustained changes in an individual's or collective's behavior, affect, mindset, values, and so on, both the researcher and the practitioner need to think through the following: "How will *lasting* change be promoted?" Building enduring development entails considering the potential chain of antecedents that influence the targeted outcome; therefore, these may first need to be cultivated in a specific sequence or in some combination. It may also be the case that different antecedents have a stronger or weaker effect on the targeted outcome and may differ in how easy or difficult they are to implement and sustain. Thinking carefully about *how* one can render an effective manipulation or intervention over the short- and long-term directs attention to the antecedents and mechanisms that initiate *and* sustain change.

For example, Detert and McKee (2026)—featured in this special issue—attend to both the nature of the immediate intervention believed necessary to stimulate development and how to sustain this growth. Working from the well-established psychotherapeutic tradition of behavioral therapy and interventions, they focus on opportunities that put people outside their comfort zone to ignite their development. Further, and importantly, they highlight that leadership development requires considering the "right" amount of time to promote lasting change and conclude that while there is currently no magic wand for determining the timing and length of an intervention, practice is required to foster a sustainable change beyond the intervention itself. They reason that multiple kinds of practice could be effective with limited but concentrated practice potentially as powerful as prolonged, repeated efforts in a more piecemeal manner.

In delivering leadership development programs, many of us have been guilty of engaging in *edutainment*, with less emphasis on the process through which development is likely to emerge and be sustained. Edutainment is similar to Hollywood movies in containing a lot of action, emotion-inducing drama, and a humoristic, charismatic protagonist. While such approaches may be justified as a means to garner higher participant satisfaction, the focus on satisfaction does not guarantee that development will occur. In fact, it may even distract participants from the hard work needed for developing complex elements of leadership, such as heightening leaders' self-concept clarity (Vongswasdi, Leroy, Menges & Lê, 2025). We are not suggesting that participant satisfaction be ignored; rather, we must create engaging interventions that focus on the mechanisms and processes through which leadership development is ignited and sustained.

Q3. *When* Will Development Realistically Occur?

Specifying the time needed for development of a particular aspect of leadership to emerge is critical to advancing theory (Q3). While some changes can begin to happen overnight (e.g., in the form of an epiphany; Dane, 2024), other changes may take years to manifest and sustain (e.g., shifting values or personality; Tasselli, Kilduff & Landis, 2018). As a general rule, development is often slow, complex, and potentially regressive, making it important to be realistic in articulating when development might surface. A great starting point to think through the needed time horizon is to investigate the causal assumptions embedded within your topical research area. Do you hypothesize that the effects will emerge in days, weeks (as in experiential research), months, or years (as found in longitudinal research)? Within your area of research, what is the assumed time lag between a construct and its antecedents (Ancona, Okhuysen & Perlow, 2001; Mitchell & James, 2001)? Does this area of research have developed ideas on whether your construct of interest is fixed or malleable? Constructs that are assumed to be fixed need more time for meaningful and transformative change to emerge (Mezirow, 2000; Moshman, 2003). Articulating assumptions about causality and construct malleability can help you theorize more precisely the timeframe needed for effects to appear, the trajectory of development, and when reinforcements may be needed (Cornelissen & Werner, 2026).

In this issue, Petriglieri (2026) shows how a particular research tradition helps define the time horizon needed for leadership development. He builds on a humanistic tradition rooted in psychodynamics, proposing a developmental model that invites people into embracing their development target and embarking on an individualized developmental journey that unfolds in a process of creation. Petriglieri (2026) conceptualizes leadership and its development as art and asserts that leadership development is analogous to creating art. He reasons that artists become better at their craft by iteratively practicing different artistic techniques, stepping back to reflect on the art they have created and refining it to create better art. Leaders should do the same—they need to iteratively practice "doing leadership," reflect and learn from their leadership, and refine it to create even better leadership. Thus, Petriglieri (2026) argues that leadership development requires significant time to emerge and reach maturation and implies a trajectory that is not linear.

In practice, as developers we sometimes promise fundamental change in the scope of a very limited timeframe, even when the construct targeted for development is quite complex. This type of *instatraining* assumes that for change to occur participants just need to invest some time and then they will develop. Of course, we know that most development takes time and persistence. Setting reasonable expectations for participants deduced from science and theory helps them be realistic with their own progress, and may even inspire them to work after the intervention ends to sustain and continue their growth.

Q4. *Who* Is Being Developed, and What Are Their Primary Developmental Needs?

Most of the leadership development discussed so far implies little variation about the people whose leadership is being developed. Q4 asks, "Who is being developed, and what are their primary developmental needs?" Specifying the level of analysis is one requirement for sound theorizing (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), and is especially important in leadership development because "who is developing" may range from individuals to dyads, teams, organizations, and beyond (Day, 2024). Further, we know that different hierarchical levels of organizational leaders contend with different challenges (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty & Salas, 2010), and therefore likely have different developmental needs. Even leaders who share the same hierarchical level or organizational position may differ in significant and relevant ways. For instance, people vary in their readiness to engage in leadership development (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), in their levels of anxiety (Vongswasdi et al., 2025), and in potentially other relevant ways. Defining the population of interest and specifying their primary developmental need is critical for more precise theories of leadership development.

Two papers in this special issue creatively focus on the question of "who," and in doing so provide excellent theoretical extensions to the field of leadership development. Ashford and colleagues (2026) argue that leadership development interventions should not just be targeting the lucky few—those individuals who have been tagged "high potentials." Rather, larger numbers of people within the organization should be included in development efforts to grow the leadership capabilities of an entire organization or community. Their focus reflects a capacity that Day (2024) refers to as collective leadership development capacities, which can become embedded in the structure, systems, and culture of the organization. Ashford and colleagues (2026) go beyond merely considering the typical individual target of leader development to thoughtfully consider different levels

of analysis and how multilevel processes impact leadership development and the enactment of leadership.

As another example from this special issue, Vassolo and colleagues (2026) articulate a leadership development theory focused on top management teams (TMT), articulating a clear "who" that the theory applies to. This focus on TMTs then leads to definition of the specific capabilities comprising strategic leadership in TMT to clarify their targeted area of development (What?). They focus their theorizing on the team-level developmental processes and conditions necessary to develop strategic leadership in TMTs, as opposed to the mechanisms involved in fostering individual team member development. Examples of these team-level processes or mechanisms that build the team's strategic leadership capability (How?) include strategic sharing and promoting productive tensions—specific processes that are relevant on the team level. We appreciate that their "who," "what," and "how" are interwoven to create a more precise description of leadership development in TMTs.

In practice, when the needs of the targeted population are not considered, the *hammer problem* can result—that is, the same hammer (content) is applied to all nails (participants). The passions and potential biases of the developer may become the core driver of indiscriminate content (i.e., the false consensus effect; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Indiscriminate content can also arise because of practical considerations: it costs a significant investment of resources to tailor a program to the different needs of the target audience. Greater clarity about the needs of the audience and acting on these insights, however, can produce a more effective intervention (Vongswasdi et al., 2025).

Q5. *Why* Is This Particular Narrative of How Leadership Develops Plausible?

The question of "why" is meant to encourage us to step back and assess whether our description of how to develop the targeted leadership area for a particular population actually makes sense *given existing literature*. Answering this question well means being able to articulate "Why this mechanism instead of this other?" or "Why this dependent variable and not another?" Such articulation requires being well-grounded in a particular research tradition or area. Put another way, your narrative about why leadership should develop in the ways you describe are plausible given what we know from the research base you identified as relevant.

All the papers in this special issue are exemplary in offering plausible explanations for how different elements of leadership develop given their chosen research tradition. For example, Palanski and Barclay (2026) extend leadership development theory by grounding their work in research on identity, motivation and context. They argue that effective leader development takes on a "self-in-context" view and conceive of a process whereby leaders consider their self-images in light of what their specific work context requires of them. They propose that a motivational gap can arise when individuals are confronted with training content that reveals relevant ways for them to grow, given their work context, which fuels development and the enactment of change as they engage in their work. Given what we know about identity (Clapp-Smith, Hammond, Lester & Palanski, 2019; Day & Harrison, 2007), motivation (Boyatzis, 2006; Wallace, Torres & Zaccaro, 2021) and how context matters (John, 2024), their theory is plausible because it builds logically from these specific literatures.

In practice, it is tempting to stray from what the science of leadership development tells us. Our deeply rooted beliefs about what is good for ourselves as human beings and by extension, the rest of the world, become the subject of our leadership development training interventions, whether there is science behind them or not. Sometimes, without even knowing it ourselves, we *preach to the choir*—letting our own passions and potentially unfounded beliefs do the talking. Especially for charismatic trainers, this may work well to enthrall participants, but the training impact may have minimal longevity (Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003).

Q6. *Where* Is Development Going to Take Place?

This final question is meant to describe more fully the context in which leadership development will occur. As with the previous questions, existing literature provides helpful starting points for thinking more expansively, deliberately, and even creatively about the context of leadership development. For instance, McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, and Morrow (1994) describe the types of on-the-job experiences that stretch leaders to learn so the job context might be highly relevant to the researcher's theorizing. For those considering leadership interventions, describing the types of work contexts that encourage participants to use what they have learned in order to continue to grow once they return to their workplace may be especially valuable (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). More contemporary and less obvious approaches can also help scholars answer the question of "where." For instance, Inceoglu, Arnold, Leroy, Lang, and Stephan (2021) use an ecosystems lens to conceive of

follower well-being as an phenomenon embedded within a broader ecosystem (i.e., one's own genetics, one's job, one's immediate social context at work, and one's organizational context). Similarly, the impact of various layers within organizational ecosystems—the individual, job, team, organization, events, society—may influence leadership development in valuable and interesting ways that deserve articulation.

For instance, Guthey and Ferry (2026), also presented in this special issue, offer a theoretical extension to "where" leadership development occurs. They define the concept of "leadership development industries," in which leadership development is a "cultural product" as it is not simply offered to organizations, but is rather shaped and cocreated by the actors and institutions that develop leaders (universities, trainers, coaches, etc.). In this work, Guthey and Ferry offer a unique view of leadership development, not only theorizing about how leaders develop, but also offering a novel perspective on this as located within wider industries that shape and are shaped by various players. Understanding the broader leadership development industry is important, as it changes the nature of developmental interventions and how they are executed and measured in terms of their impact, thus highlighting the importance of considering the broader ecosystem in which leadership development operates.

As another example in this special issue, McMillan and colleagues (2026) offer a different "where" when theorizing about leadership development. They focus on the conditions required for translation of learning from leadership developmental programs into behavior once participants returns to work. They argue that for successful translation and action to occur, an understanding of the context in which participants are embedded is necessary. These authors conceptualize the context as the organization—its needs and ongoing work—and reason that true internalization of development is dependent on participants perceiving an alignment between the content of the program and their perceived connection to the organization, specifically, salient shared social identities in the organization. In other words, when participants see the program content as helping them to represent and advance their salient social organizational identities, they are more likely to sustain the development initiated in the program back in their organizational work roles. In describing the interplay between individual leaders and their organizational context, McMillan and colleagues (2026) achieve greater theoretical clarity.

We, as leadership development trainers, face the challenge of ensuring that skills learned during a particular intervention are used and further developed when participants return to their jobs. Participants (and sometimes trainers) often prefer to stay in the *bubble of the training*, not always wanting or seeing how to enact the desired behaviors in the workplace. Prior literature offers various ways to boost that transfer of leadership development including managerial support, work reminders, on-the-job training, needs analyses, and so on (e.g., Lacerenza et al., 2017). Yet, without sound theory it is impossible to know which of these efforts might best help participants continue to develop beyond the end of the intervention.

CONCLUSION

Our collective challenge in leadership development is to generate more precise theory to advance and link science and practice. We invite those with topical expertise in areas adjacent to leadership, as well as those who study leadership development, to join us in this quest. To equip you (and us), we applied Whetten's (1989) six-question framework to the phenomenon of leadership development and articulated the necessary building blocks for constructing sound theory in this area. Together with the authors of the papers in this special issue, we are excited to contribute to nurturing a more comprehensive and cohesive theory-based field of leadership development to better serve scholars and practitioners.

Hannes Leroy
Erasmus University

Lisa Dragoni
Wake Forest University

Bruce Avolio
University of Washington

Steffen Giessner
Erasmus University

Moran Anisman-Razin
University of Limerick

Niels Van Quaquebeke
Kühne Logistics University

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