

A stylized map of Australia is the background of the entire page. The map is filled with a pattern of small dots in various shades of purple and pink. The dots are more densely packed in some areas and more sparse in others, creating a textured effect. The map is oriented with the top of the continent at the top of the page.

From Divergence to Convergence: Integrating Research and Practice in Australian Leadership Development

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Overview

There is a multi-billion-dollar global Leadership Industry, comprised of myriad courses, workshops, programs, coaches, books, blogs, self-proclaimed gurus and more who all promise to turn people into great leaders. The sheer magnitude of the Leadership Industry suggests an almost insatiable appetite for leadership development. But there remains a stark lack of consensus on what leadership truly is, how best to develop it, what we hope to achieve through its development, and how to determine when or if development has occurred.

This ambiguity speaks to the oft-bemoaned research-practice gap and underscores the critical need for increased connection and collaboration between those researching leadership and its development, and those actively working as leadership development practitioners.

The inaugural Leadership Summit hosted in Launceston in early 2024, brought together top experts from both research and practice to engage in open, challenging, and collaborative dialogue. By working together, we aim to ensure that our efforts in teaching, researching, and developing leadership are best positioned to have the impact we intend.

Context: The Leadership Summit

In March 2024, leadership development practitioners and leadership researchers from around Australasia gathered in Launceston, Tasmania for the inaugural National Leadership Summit. The intent of the summit was to bring together those at the forefront of leadership development and to break down barriers (real or perceived) between research and practice.

The aim was to forge meaningful connections and collaborations between those studying leadership and those actively working to develop leadership capability at the individual, organisational, community, regional, and national levels.

The 2024 Leadership Summit was jointly initiated and hosted by Tasmanian Leaders, the National Leadership Network, and the University of Tasmania with support from Rural Leadership Foundation Australia, and The Australian National University. The hope is that this becomes an annual event at which practitioners and researchers come together to deepen and strengthen the understanding and practice of leader and leadership development.

The Summit consisted of a range of workshops, presentations, and discussions on topics ranging from Indigenous perspectives on time; Greek mythology and leadership; leadership and identity; the persistent gender inequalities in leadership; the nature of and search for the common good; political and ideological polarisation; the nature and importance of



truth in relation to leadership; implications of AI for leadership; outdated leadership notions that refuse to die; the challenges of evaluating and measuring leadership development; and future forecasts of where leadership development is (or should be) heading.

The Summit revealed both the often-bemoaned research-practice gap and a pervasive sense that researchers and practitioners have distinct perspectives and often fail to engage in meaningful dialogue or share a common understanding of their pursuit. The purpose of this White Paper is to distil when, how, and on which topics of divergence and convergence emerged between researchers and practitioners at The Summit.

As with the Summit itself, the intent of this White Paper is to explore both the real and perceived barriers between research and practice. But for this to happen we must first reveal what these barriers are so that they can be dismantled and reassembled as bridges to more meaningful connection and mutual understanding.

The remainder of this White Paper unfolds as follows: First, we explore the primary sources of tension and divergence observed or experienced between researchers and practitioners. Next, we discuss sources of synergy and convergence, before outlining shared sentiments in relation to the key challenges and opportunities facing leadership development in Australia and globally. We conclude with recommendations for leadership development research and practice, with a focus on those initiatives that are best placed to deepen the connections and draw on the wisdom and experience of both research and practice to develop the leaders and leadership our world so desperately needs.

This White Paper has been drafted by a collection of Summit delegates, representing both research and practice. We draw primarily on our individual and collective experiences of, and reflections on, the Summit, noting that even among the author team there were divergent experiences and paradoxical reflections.

Key sources divergence

Divergent worldviews

Summit delegates came together with a shared intent to break down barriers, but persistent differences between world views, which were neither named nor explored, seemed to limit our opportunities to truly understand others' perspectives in meaningful ways.

The term 'worldview' pertains to the set of assumptions all people hold, which affect cognition and behaviour (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Our worldviews are shaped by our upbringing, enculturation, identities, groups we belong to, belief systems, political and ideological orientations, maturity and development, cognitive complexity, experience and more. Consciously or unconsciously, our worldviews shape how we understand the world and our experiences thereof. Although we did not start the Summit with shared discussion or contemplation of our worldviews, in retrospect taking the time and creating the space to do so may have helped surface the implicit assumptions underpinning the researcher and practitioner perspectives and redress the primary divergence noted.

One driver of this divergence is the different 'goalposts' for practitioners and researchers.

Many of the practitioners are in the thick of it; on the ground working through messy, blurry, contested, polarized, complex, issues-driven realities of developing leadership capacity within people so that they may be better able to tackle the challenges that they, their organisations, and their communities face.

Practitioners do so all the while navigating the commercial and political realities of needing to generate income and ‘win’ funding, which necessitates evidencing the value of programs to attract participants and satisfy funders. There is also great diversity among the cohorts with whom practitioners work, from all levels of government, to marginalised communities, corporate entities, not-for-profits, and everything in between.

Researchers, on the other hand, tend to strive for precision, accuracy, the construction of robust theories, well-validated measures, and defensible empirical findings worthy of publication. Top-quality leadership research is determined by rigour, where findings must stand up to ruthless blind review to be considered ‘valid’ or ‘true’ within their respective disciplines or research paradigms. Researchers operate within the rules and expectations of academia. This means many researchers remain focused within their disciplinary or methodological silos, where they can obtain a certain level of expertise in relation to key theories, concepts, or phenomena. While some researchers engage in community or executive programs, the education or development efforts of most researchers focus on the under-graduate and post-graduate students encountered in university classrooms.

While overly simplistic, this characterisation of the divergence between the messy, pragmatic realities of practitioners, and the tightly bound, rigour-obsessed realities of researchers helps illustrate two very different worldviews.

Practitioners want and need to converse about wide-ranging issues and topics that transcend multiple levels of analysis and academic domains based primarily on their observations and personal experiences. In contrast, researchers tend to prefer to speak definitively about phenomena within their sphere of expertise drawing on theoretical or empirically validated evidence to substantiate their claims. This may be why some practitioners observed

researchers as curiously insistent on staying ‘in their lanes’ or why researchers appeared disinterested in the multiple, complex realities of practice. This may also account for why some researchers observed practitioners as appearing to lack rigour or being dismissive of scientific evidence.

Another factor underpinning this primary divergence in worldview is that much of the academic research being conducted is focused on organisational contexts and bound by theoretical rigour and precise conceptualisations or measurement attempts. In contrast, many development programs are run as community-based initiatives, often adopting somewhat fluid and contextualized approaches to suit the needs of specific participants and places. This context-based approach often flies in the face of dominant psycho-scientific research paradigms, which are ill-equipped to draw precise conclusions out of complex, contextually emergent phenomena.

The divergence in worldview led some practitioners to feel as if researchers had no interest in understanding the contextual realities they operate within. In contrast, some researchers felt practitioners had little understanding of the importance or role of rigour and precision in attempts to define leadership and related concepts. This is not to suggest, however, that all practitioners fully adopt contextual and messy worldviews, nor is it to suggest that all academics fully adopt rigorous and precise worldviews. Indeed, some delegates may have perceived themselves to have one foot firmly planted in both worldviews. The tension between these worldviews and the desire to find a middle ground that satisfied the needs of both worldviews was exemplified by one delegate who suggested that:

“...practitioners prioritise selling more seats on existing leadership programmes. Their worldview is centred on leadership development as an event and programme [whereas] the academic worldview seemed to prioritise academic rigour over impact. But, what if something is rigorous and irrelevant? Many also had a rigid bias to their field of study and could only seem to see the world through their specific lens”

Some practitioners reported feeling as if the Summit was overly ‘research-led’, while some researchers felt there was a lack of research (as in debating new methods, applications, or issues). Some practitioners observed researchers as unwilling or unable to think beyond the scope or focus on their current research interests, while some researchers observed practitioners refusing to accept or consider research evidence contrary to their program norms. These divergent experiences seem to stem from delegates being situated in divergent world views where any time outside one’s own preferred worldview can feel like too much.

We posited that several of the tensions that emerged between these groups, pertain less to their beliefs than their epistemology. For example, while both practitioners and researchers seem to believe adaptive leadership is the most suitable approach to a complex problem, there appeared divergence in how researchers claim to know what they know about adaptive leadership versus how practitioners claim to know what they know about adaptive leadership.

This issue of differing worldviews, undergirded by divergent epistemologies and assumptions about leadership and how we approach its development appears to be the biggest sources of divergence between researchers and practitioners. The temptation is to argue either/or – to debate which approach is more important, more valid, more worthy of consideration in the ways we design and evaluate our leadership development courses, programs, and interventions, either –

- Carefully theorised, empirically tested and validated causal associations, and the rigour of blind review, or,
- Observed, enacted, lived experience of designing, facilitating, and participating in practice-based, narrative-driven leadership development initiatives.

But, instead of driving the wedge further, we suggest this is not an issue of either/or, but of both/and.

There is vast potential in pursuing a future of leadership development that considers and accommodates multiple worldviews, while simultaneously striving for some principled consensus on what leadership actually is and what we seek to achieve through its development.



What is leadership?

Throughout the Summit there were murmurs about the lack of clarity we shared regarding the most fundamental question: *what is leadership?* While some fluidity and divergence may be needed in understanding this question, it represents another elephant in the room, which could – or should – have been addressed. For example, some assumed others were adopting a managerialist view of leaders as people in positions vested with legitimate authority, while others claim to view leadership as elaborate, emergent systems of relational influence. Leaders and leadership are conceptualised in both these ways – and in many other ways too – but failing to have these conversations openly about how we understand and approach what leadership is and who leaders are allowed tensions to go unaddressed and therefore unresolved. These multiple, sometimes conflicting understandings of what leaders and leadership are, are increasingly recognized in research (e.g. Day et al., 2014; Grint, 2005; Kempster et al., 2011).

Leadership development for what?

Another source of divergence among delegates revolved around differing answers to the question, “*Leadership development for what?*” There was discussion about including environmental sustainability and inclusivity as key foci in leadership development, with some emphasising their importance while others questioned the relevance. The disruptive impact of generative AI on the sector also sparked debate, highlighting varying levels of readiness to adopt AI and associated concerns. Accessibility of leadership training emerged as another contentious point, with resistance to acknowledging how the sometimes-prohibitive costs of leadership development perpetuate exclusion and privilege. Finally, the clash between capitalistic and anti-capitalistic forces influenced differing perspectives on the purpose and direction of leadership development.

Despite differing world views and some divergent views on what leadership is and the purpose of leadership development – it also became evident that we are not as divergent as might be assumed. And, in a very general sense,

delegates seemed to gather with the same basic assumption that leadership matters and that it can be developed.

Above and beyond divergences that became evident, there was a shared overarching intent to lift the understanding and practice of leadership and leadership development so that we might cultivate the leadership capability required to navigate the challenges we face.

Before moving on to elucidate synergies, we must note that our characterisation of divergences is necessarily generalised and drawn only from the experiences and observations of this authorship team. In distilling distinctions in worldview, apparent diversity in conceptions of leadership, and varied purpose in developing leadership we do not accurately nor fully elucidate all Summit delegate’s experience nor any one individual’s stance. Rather we seek to synthesise the generalised sentiment among those more aligned with practice and those more aligned with research. Noting here that at least a few Summit Delegates, including some authors of this White Paper, consider themselves ‘pracademics’, that is practice-focused academics who reside between the spheres of practice and research.

Key sources of convergence

Despite these obvious differences in worldviews between practitioners and researchers, there was coalescence around the notion that leadership matters, that it can be developed, and that we can do leadership development better.

A shared concern among both groups was the lack of ability to determine or demonstrate the impact of their work, which seemed to be an underlying issue that many wanted to address. For example, measuring leadership (and development thereof), including return on investment in development programs was raised in a number of program sessions and informal conversations.

There was synergy around the idea that leaders and leadership have a role to play in addressing the many complex challenges facing communities and organisations (e.g. labour market challenges, increasing diversity, climate change, mental health, polarisation, global conflict, and more). And there was a broad consensus that leadership development should not be reserved for the elite nor confined to top managerial positions.

Both practitioners and researchers showed a willingness to explore new ways of doing things, including critically examining the intersections between research, practice, and the direction of the field. This openness was particularly evident during the summit's diverse sessions, which combined conversations, panels, and workshops, fostering a reflective and collaborative atmosphere.

There was a mutual recognition that further work is required to tackle the most pressing challenges of our time, beyond just discussing favourite theories and case studies.

This highlighted a sense of belonging together, with an understanding that research and practice complement each other. Both groups acknowledged that their profession would remain impoverished and unsophisticated as long as they remain in silos and until they could find deeper synergies and opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

This sense of being two sides of the same coin suggested a promising foundation for future cooperation and deepening partnerships.

Challenges to Leadership Development

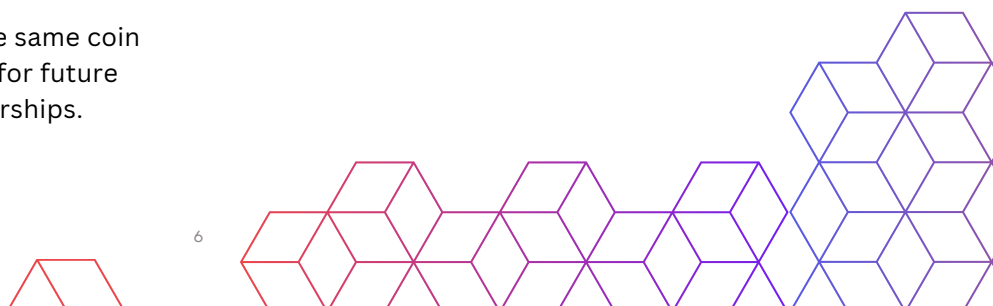
The challenges facing leadership development in Australia are multifaceted and complex, reflecting both broad, fundamental issues such as what leadership actually is, the nature of truth or 'the good', and more specific, practical concerns such as how we measure impact or which activities we employ to enable leadership capability.

At a foundational level, competing claims about truth and ethics, often tied to ideological perspectives or political commitments, create a fragmented landscape among researchers, practitioners, and the cohorts we serve.

The question of what 'good leadership' is and how we might evidence it varies widely across social, cultural and political spectrums; from the 'woke left' to the 'alt-right' – and from marginalised community groups to Fortune 500 boardrooms.

This diversity in perspectives raises critical questions about how leadership development programs can account for the 'common good' while catering to the varying political, epistemic, and ethical viewpoints held by academics, practitioners, and leaders.

Moreover, there is a significant disconnect between management structures, the practice of leadership, and how these elements are addressed in both research and practice. Breaking through entrenched mindsets that revolve around traditional, egoic notions of managerial leadership remains a major challenge. Leadership is often perceived as inherently being an elite position tied to legitimate authority, creating confusion about what most leadership researchers and leadership development practitioners regard as its true meaning and role in society and



organisations. This perception challenges the field to redefine leadership as a culturally informed relational process of social influence co-constructed between people leading and people following.

More specific challenges include the need to adapt leadership development to contemporary issues such as generative AI, political polarization, societal shifts, and our polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024) context. There is an ongoing debate about the usefulness of current leadership theory and the effectiveness of leadership development practices and their ability to address the most pressing challenges of our time. The lack of empirical support for popular approaches, such as adaptive leadership, and the confusion surrounding fundamental concepts like truth, virtue, and ‘the good’, add to this complexity. These challenges of rigorously testing theory and empirically assessing the validity of development practices, and contextualising development efforts to specific sites and cohorts seem only resolvable via continued and deepened collaboration between research and practice.

The challenge of conceptualising leadership as both an individual and collective phenomena without creating false dichotomies also remains.

This emerges as persistent confusion around the distinction(s) between leader and leadership development (Day et al., 2014).

Leader development focuses on developing human capital in individual leaders (e.g. mindsets, behaviours, and skills). Leadership development focuses on developing social capital in collectives (e.g. relationships, ways of working, collaborative decision-making processes).

Because leader development focuses on the development of individuals rather than group-level processes, it may fail to address systemic issues, and the need for broader social change and collective action. There is a growing recognition that leadership should evolve from a focus on individual leaders to fostering system change, requiring a re-evaluation of the purpose of leadership development itself.

Measuring the impact, outcomes, or ‘value’ of leadership development remains a significant challenge.

High-quality measurement instruments are essential for iterating theory, informing research, and providing a basis for evidence-based practice. However, the field is still developing its approach to measurement, and struggles to determine with certainty what it is about programs that works for whom in which contexts and why. This highlights the need for collaborative efforts between academics and practitioners to create accessible and robust evaluation methodologies and measurement methods. Addressing these challenges requires an open, honest dialogue and a willingness to develop literacy in and experiment with traversing differing worldviews so that we might explore new ways of understanding and practising leadership and leadership development. It might also involve the pooling of resources including datasets between practitioners and researchers.

A final challenge to all those working in leadership development is to get clear and remain entirely transparent about the intent of our various programs and endeavours.

What is it that we’re trying to do through leadership development?

What issues or advancements or solutions or inequities or objectives are we trying to achieve? What is the purpose of our development efforts? Or, in other words, leadership development *for what?*

Key opportunities for Leadership Development

Leadership development in Australia stands at a crossroads, presenting numerous opportunities to redefine and enhance the field. Broadly, there is an opportunity to shift away from outdated notions of leadership as being inherently autocratic and power-based, towards a more nuanced understanding of leadership processes of community and culture development and collective action.

This requires a collective effort from academics, practitioners, pracademics, and leaders to re-educate and reshape the perception of leadership in society.

A significant opportunity lies in the willingness of people to engage in conversations about the future of leadership. To this effect, at the Summit there were discussions on spirituality and finding common ground, indicating a readiness to explore deeper, more meaningful aspects of leadership. Embracing transdisciplinary approaches by incorporating voices from futurists, sociologists, anthropologists, First Nations, and social impact researchers can broaden the scope of leadership research and practice, bringing fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to the forefront, while continuing to respond to pragmatic community and organisational needs.

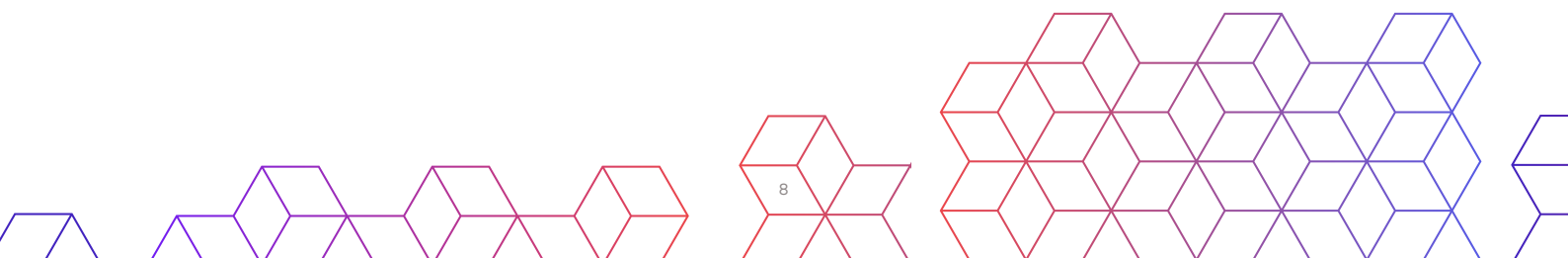
Effective collaboration between leadership academics and practitioners is another key opportunity. This can take various forms, such as academics advising on practitioner-led projects, establishing action-research initiatives to integrate theory with practice, testing theory in practice, and constructing theory from practice, and practitioners providing access to samples for academic research. By coordinating efforts between leadership development theory, measurement, research, and practice, both sides can benefit. For example, findings from leadership

development programs can inform and iterate leadership theories, while academic critiques can refine popular approaches to development or measurement used by practitioners.

There may also be a chance to construct a metatheory of leadership that acknowledges its multi-layered (individual, team, institutional, societal) and multi-faceted (physical-psycho-political-cultural) nature, nested in context. This comprehensive framework could help situate various approaches within a broader understanding of the field. Emphasising complexity-based approaches to leadership, given the intricate nature of 21st-century challenges, is crucial. A focus on contextuality and leadership in complexity could play a role in addressing the organisational, social, political, epistemic, and ethical divergences raised during the Summit.

Collaborations aimed at evolving leadership development to tackle complex challenges, such as climate crisis, sustainability, global conflict, polarisation, inclusive diversity and more – and from multiple worldviews – represent another opportunity. By combining practical expertise with cutting-edge research, effective and impactful programs can be designed, assessed, iterated, and continually improved. Additionally, learning to have 'impossible conversations' about what is 'true' and what is 'good' can foster common ground between divergent groups, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation among researchers, practitioners, and the various cohorts we engage.

Ultimately, these opportunities highlight the potential for leadership development in Australia to evolve and adapt, ensuring it remains relevant and effective in addressing contemporary challenges and is increasingly context-reflexive. By embracing collaboration, interdisciplinary approaches, and a redefined understanding of leadership, the field can make significant strides towards a more inclusive and sustainable future.



Recommendations

The overarching recommendation is that we – both researchers and practitioners – remain committed to creating space and opportunities to meaningfully explore divergences and convergences among those engaged in leadership development.

To maximise the impact of leadership development in Australia, fostering collaboration between academics and practitioners, ensuring the practical application of leadership theories, and integrating comprehensive and inclusive approaches are crucial. The following condensed recommendations are categorised into general, researcher-specific, and practitioner-specific sections.

General Recommendations



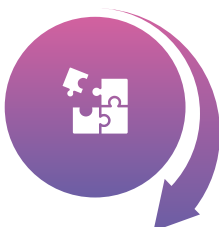
Create Collaborative Partnerships

Foster collaborations between researchers and practitioners to co-design, evaluate, and iterate leadership programs, ensuring practical relevance and academic rigour.



Facilitate Action-Research and Peer-to-Peer Coaching

Promote action-research projects and peer-to-peer coaching between researchers and practitioners to embed leadership development, generate evidence-based outcomes, and create a shared responsibility for continuous growth.



Integrate Complexity and Systems Thinking

Incorporate complexity and systems thinking into leadership development research and programs and evaluation to effectively address 21st-century challenges.



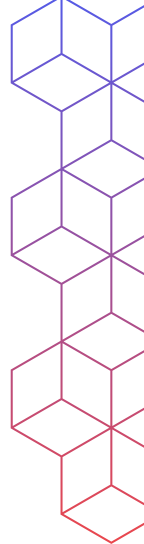
Promote Inclusive Diversity in Leadership

Advocate for leadership development as a means to create inclusive diversity, enriching leadership practices with diverse perspectives and fostering open, challenging conversations.



Establish Knowledge Exchange Centres

Develop centres for knowledge exchange where research and practice converge to test, trial, and develop new leadership practices, and continue to hold cross-field Summits for ongoing collaboration and development.



Researcher-specific recommendations

01

Engage with Practice

Collaborate with practitioners to understand pressing issues, observe the application of leadership concepts, and discern between well-validated and weakly validated measurement instruments.

02

Participate in Leadership Programs

Attend and participate in leadership development programs that researchers have helped design to gain firsthand experience and insights.

03

Collaborate with Diverse Communities

Work with diverse communities to challenge and extend existing theories and evidence, moving beyond traditional Western, corporate samples.

04

Enhance Accessibility of Research

Improve the accessibility and relevance of research findings through compelling storytelling, practical examples, and educating non-researchers on interpreting and applying research insights.

05

Explore Interdisciplinary Opportunities:

Seek interdisciplinary opportunities and explore non-traditional and emerging research paradigms and methodologies to deepen understanding of leadership practices and purposes. Engage in continuous learning and collaboration with practitioners to stay updated on practical applications of leadership.

Practitioner-specific recommendations

01

Engage Researchers for Robust Evaluation

Collaborate with researchers to develop robust measurement and evaluation practices for leadership programs, incorporating universal measures for comparison across different contexts and cohorts.

02

Collaborate on Funding and Curriculum Development

Work together on funding bids and engage researchers in developing program curricula and content delivery, ensuring current, evidence-informed practices and exposing participants to the latest research.

03

Engage in Continuous Learning

Stay updated on current research findings, best practices, and innovative approaches by continuously learning and collaborating with researchers.

04

Read and Connect with Theorists

Read the original works of theorists and reach out to the researchers whose theories and evidence inform your program design and claims.



Next steps

The Inaugural Leadership Summit demonstrated the power of collaboration between leadership researchers and practitioners as we move from divergence to convergence in our efforts to lift the understanding and practice of leadership development in Australia and beyond. By following the recommendations above, leadership development in Australia can become more integrated, impactful, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities and organisations, and be an example to the rest of the world.

To continue this momentum, we must work to bridge the gaps between differing camps—whether academic vs. practitioner, left vs. right, or other worldviews. This can be achieved through future Summits, further efforts and writing and working across divides, the creation of more co-developed resources, and other artifacts that reflect our shared intention to develop leaders and leadership best placed to address the grand challenges we face. By maintaining open dialogues and collaborative efforts, we can build a robust and adaptive leadership development landscape that meets the evolving needs of our society.



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