

Profound Leadership and Adult Education: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: The intentional teaching application of leadership theories is not often addressed in leadership development programs comprising the field of adult education. The purpose of this study is to understand more deeply the quality, characteristics, and practices of profound leaders. This is an exploratory, empirical study, interviewing seven participants chosen for leadership acumen and vetted by the research team: employing a two-interview sequence, research apprenticeship model, and thematic analysis. Initial findings include commonly elicited elements, viewed through the lens of integrative literature review findings. Understanding and applying the profound leadership concept offers the field of adult education useful implications with information about leadership development, teaching leadership in higher education and organizations, and practicing leadership allowing flourishing in individuals, organizations, and society.

Keywords: profound learning, profundity, profound leadership

We investigated the profound leadership phenomena by collecting data via interactive interviews. Findings from our integrative literature review formed the basis of our research question and initial interview questions. The lens of profound learning provides an opportunity to further solidify contributions to adult education, connecting adult learning and leadership. The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of profound leadership to understand more deeply the qualities, characteristics, and practices of profound leadership.

Leadership is well-researched and contributes substantially to the adult education field (Scott et al., 2019); our research team questions if adult education intentionally teaches nascent leaders how to apply leadership theory to practice. Adult educators interact with educational, organizational, and community leadership who would benefit from intentionality. We suggest the profound leadership concept enhances teaching and learning of practical leadership skills. This empirical study uses a thematic analysis to look more deeply into the concept of profound leadership.

McCrorry and James (2016) suggested the gap in “lack of qualified leadership candidates who are able to perform from a global perspective” (p. 207) may be filled through adult education programs. Citing the CPAE (Commission of Professors of Adult Education), McCrorry and James (2016) referenced “the study of leadership, including theories of organizational leadership, administration and change” as suggested in Standards for Adult Education Graduate Programs (CPAE, 2014, p.9). Adult educator usage of profound leadership theory with adult learners may be useful, forward-thinking, and valuable to the adult education field.

Background

An integrative literature review on Profound Leadership, formed by Profound Learning, and five key leadership theories contributes to this empirical study. Kroth's (2016) foundational profound learning concept informs the integrative literature review and holds as a theoretical framework for the purposes of the empirical study. Kroth defined a profound learner as "someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time" (p. 29). This foundational learning concept supports profound leadership conceptualization in the integrative literature review and provides the lens through which to view profound leadership in this empirical study.

The key contributory leadership theories include spiritual, authentic, servant, transformational, and level five leadership. Each leadership theory examined through the lens of profound learning, elicited key elements to build the profound leadership concept. The built concept is a direct outcome of the integrative literature review. It informs and guides this empirical study's participant selection, interview questions, interview protocol, and methods. Components from the five reviewed leadership theories informing profound leadership include empathy, humility, intuition, listening, servitude, balanced processing, ethical approaches, promoting growth and development, resolve and will, reflection and awareness, respect and fair treatment, motivation and stimulation, and goal orientation (Scott et al., 2019). Participant selection and interview questions were formed around these pillars and used to elicit added or differing elements, building from the initial literature review, and moving into the empirical study.

A definition of profundity also lends itself to this study, incorporating "profundity as intellectual depth, something profound or abstruse, and the quality or state of being profound or deep" (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 1997, p. 931). Empirical study questions and interview protocol elaborate on a deep or profound orientation and solicited participant insights into this orientation in the context of leadership.

Methodology

We framed this study as exploratory with aims of understanding more deeply the quality, characteristics, and practices of profound leaders. The main research question asks, what constitutes profound leadership? Supporting research focus areas include practices (actions and behaviors), individual traits and characteristics, and contextual elements to inform profound leadership.

Participant selection was based on researcher input, collective consensus, and collaborative discussion. Early in the empirical study, and informed by the integrative literature review, each member of the research team identified one to three candidates for participation. The interview candidates were captured on a shared worksheet, documenting the nominator, candidate location, affiliation, selection criteria, contact information, and justification. As names were added to the list, the research team discussed each candidate and their potential contributions to the study. Participants were selected when justification for inclusion in the study could be validated by at least two research team members, participants were viewed as accessible and available, and candidates could be considered appropriate first interviewees for doctoral students learning both process and content. The research team rated seven candidates for the first round of interviews.

The first group of participant interviews included both a first and second interview, pairing a faculty member and doctoral student for interviewing mentorship purposes. Interview participants remain confidential with identities known only to the research team; the University of Idaho Institutional Review Board approved the project as an exempt study. Each participant was reminded of the voluntary nature of their study engagement and rights to leave or abstain at any time. Interviewees were invited with an initial informal inquiry, followed by a formal interview invitation letter. Participant acceptance of study terms included acknowledgement that study participants were over the age of 18, identified as experts with valuable insights to contribute to the topic of profound leadership, and informed that research results would be used to identify qualities, characteristics, and practices of profound leadership; with contributions to help adult educators prepare students for lifelong learning.

Interview questions were generated and curated by the research team. Initial brainstorming and collaborative dialogue elicited long lists of questions, eventually culled down to a clear and concise interview protocol supported by Seidman's (2006) phased interview approach. Participants were introduced to the exploratory study, potential future contributions to organizational leadership, and preparations for adult learning and improved performance. Interviews were recorded in audio format using virtual Zoom meetings to accommodate co-located interviewers and participants, as well as COVID-19 pandemic driven ways of remote working. Participants were thanked for their participation, reminded of their voluntary participation, and implied consent, and that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

The two-interview sequence draws on Seidman's (2006) three interview structure for phenomenological data collection. Seidman's structure facilitates a deep dive into participants' background, their experience with profound leadership as a research topic, and the meaning they make of the research topic, all while building strong rapport. For this empirical study, we collapsed Seidman's three interviews into two. Interview one explored participant's biography and history, then moved into the participant's current lived experience with the profound leadership research topic. The biographical and contextual questions asked during the first interview focused on participants' historical context and current lived experience with leadership, personal, educational, and professional background, life growing up, school experiences, college, first jobs, and life outside of work. Moving beyond these informational and contextual background questions, interview one segued into leadership questions, focusing on the role of leadership in day-to-day life, qualities, and traits of leaders, influences on leadership, and processes of becoming a leader.

Interview two started with additional questions about the participant's current lived experience, transitioning into the meaning of that experience, eliciting leadership components, stories, and experiences. The second interview centered on profound leadership questions, inquiring about leader role models, what profound leadership may look or feel like, essential profound leadership qualities, experiences or observations of leaders doing profound things, and undesirable leadership traits. As time allowed, participants were also asked about building trust as profound leaders, opportunities for learning, defining "profound leadership," their views about profound leaders, and direct experiences with these leaders. The interviews focused on questions to elicit and evoke stories, cultivating richness and depth. Interview two finished by establishing closure with the participant and fostering opportunities for future research participants through the

snowball method. Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Seidman (2006) informed and guided our interview protocol and process. In the initial phases of the study, faculty led the interviews with doctoral students observing and learning in an apprenticeship model. As the study progressed and doctoral students on the research team understood and learned the process, they took advantage of opportunities to lead interviews, switching interviewer roles with faculty, who continued to provide mentorship, guidance, and support.

Data analysis employed a qualitative, thematic analysis approach, with a goal of making sense of information participants shared (Merriam, 2009). We selected a thematic analysis approach for its use in electing relationships, similarities, and differences from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The research team used collaboration tools and shared files to follow Lester et al.'s (2020) seven phases of thematic analysis: (a) preparing and organizing data, (b) transcribing the data, (c) becoming familiar with the data, (d) memo-ing the data, (e) coding the data, (f) moving from codes to categories, and categories to themes, and (g) cultivating transparency. In support of phases one and two, each interview included a process of memos and observations, and post-interview debrief discussion. Interview audio recordings were submitted and transcribed by an independent transcriptionist and returned to the research team for review and analysis. To become familiar with the data as part of phase three, each research team member reviewed interview notes and transcripts to elicit initial codes, explored and documented profound leader participant demographics. Memos and interview notes used along with interview transcripts begin to elicit codes and commonalities among the interviews and participants. Initial coding is based on Saldana's (2016) open coding process, breaking data into specific parts and exploring potential similarities and differences. Transparency throughout this process garnered through frequent research team meetings, documenting notes and findings in shared files, and open discussion throughout the course of this study.

Findings

As an empirical study using qualitative methods, initial findings included commonly elicited elements from the interviews, as viewed through the lens of findings from the integrative literature review (see Figure 1). Humility, noted by multiple participants, suggested profound leaders embody humility or are "super humble," or may demonstrate a "quiet humility, making others feel comfortable." Profound leaders were described as having a deep awareness of self and others. Awareness extended to areas of self-work, understanding their part in the world, embodying self-awareness, knowing, and accepting themselves, even achieving self-transcendence. Several participants described deep spiritual beliefs and spirituality influencing their upbringing and values. We anticipate future interviews needing to validate the prominence of this as a theme. Consistency and stability are noted as integral elements, and as demonstrated by modeling behavior, showing class, keeping a calm head, choosing behavior based on values, remaining level-headed, and being approachable. Multiple participants spoke of their vocation as being driven by the heart, finding something that you love to do and that earns your attention, work that is felt in the heart and soul.

Participants described profound leaders as having an aura of positive magnetism. Part of the drawing towards these types of leaders, was that they meet people where they are, speak their language, and invite them into the conversation. Participants noted profound leaders portrayed a

sense-of-self, stepped up when needed, skillfully drew out people's strengths, and exhibited a willingness to sacrifice. Profound leaders again reinforcing humility, exemplified listening deeply, practiced self-compassion, and kept themselves motivated to not become complacent.

Figure 1. *Initial Profound Leadership Elements*

humility	magnetism	assuredness	coolness under fire
deep awareness	sense of self	true to principles	familial foundations
deep spiritual beliefs	mentoring influences	costs of being a leader	skilled boundary setting
consistency and stability	well integrated personality	respect in taking responsibility	meeting people where they are
driven by work that speaks to the heart	unintended outcome: being a good leader	does not always integrate with partnership	family influence on the individual's true north

Participants commonly noted mentoring influences during different times of their life originating from family members, friends, and professional colleagues. Mentors influenced values-formation, behaviors and best practices, opportunities, and self-awareness. Becoming a good leader was less of a goal and more often an unintended outcome. Regardless of the intention, the result shone with success. This attitude portrayed as an outcome reinforces participant humility and humility in those they identified as profound leaders. While humble, the noted leaders exemplified a sense of assuredness, confidence, and competence, reinforced with discipline, values, continuous learning, and solid work ethic.

Participants communicated a variety of values (family, faith, taking responsibility, ownership, hard work, efficiency, effectiveness, goodness, human approaches, learning, interdependency). The theme of values, as a guiding construct, rang true across the interviews. Personal costs noted by leader participants, related to lack of integration with partnerships or home life impact. Revealing personal struggles impacted by leadership opportunities, reflected leader's willingness to acknowledge mistakes, remember human fallibility, express regret, and focus on transparency. Sharing these experiences strengthened acknowledgement of profound leaders' honesty, integrity, and respect for those who assume responsibility. Remaining cool in tough situations links to consistency and stability, and demonstrates compassion, empathy, and thinking of others in a manner that is focused on betterment, humanity, safety, and needs of the greater good. Strong familial foundations were common among study participants, remarks alluded to early leaders in immediate or extended family influence on values, formed work ethic and gratitude for support, history, and influencing perspectives. Other commonly noted elements included an ability to set boundaries, finding and achieving balance, and leveraging resilience.

Discussion

After completing a two-interview sequence with seven participants, common elements were captured and coded by the research team. Shared files and regular collaboration sessions allowed for group analysis of findings and formation of next steps. The student-teacher apprenticeship model lent to an effective adult learning experience, providing for growth in both content and process areas. Specifically, the study's qualitative research processes demonstrated through practical application by the faculty mentors provided for process learning and apprenticeship for doctoral students. Content and concept elements elicited through these qualitative research processes further enhanced the apprenticeship model and informed the profound leadership concept. Considering both the "how" and the "what" of profound leadership, we find this concept to provide solid contribution to adult education in a way that may inform leadership development, teaching leadership in higher education and organizations, and practicing leadership in a manner that lifts up individuals, organizations, and society alike.

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