

## **Emergency Services Leadership: The Lived Experience**

R. JEFFREY MAXFIELD, Utah Valley University  
jmaxfield@uvu.edu

ERIC J. RUSSELL, Utah Valley University  
eric.russell@uvu.edu

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative phenomenological study set forth to discover the lived experience associated with being a leader. The researchers recruited four executive level leaders from multiple emergency and public service organizations to participate in the study. To discover how different leaders interpreted their lived experience of becoming or being a leader, the researchers employed a phenomenological design, allowing for a rich understanding of the participants' experience. The coding and data analysis process revealed multiple themes from the words of the participants. The implications of this study address the lived experience of leadership. It also adds to academic leadership theory and assists in developing a pathway for strengthening leadership development and/or education.

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This qualitative phenomenological study set forth to discover the experience of being a leader within the emergency services. Much of what has been researched and explained about leadership is from an epistemological perspective, which is the systematic consideration of knowing (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Leaders are observed, dissected, analyzed and deconstructed ad nauseam, in the attempt to unlock the secrets of leadership. However, leadership is an abstract human dynamic, not a physical one.

Leadership is one of the most studied, yet least understood social sciences (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Using the scientific method to attempt discovery of leadership secrets has not been very effective, and most likely cannot be when searching for meaning. Van Manen (1990) argued that human science, in contrast to natural science, involves interpretations descriptions and self-reflective or critical analysis. Stated differently, we explain nature but we must understand human life. This requires discovery of the lived experience (ontology) to coincide with what is known (epistemology), or in other words, the consideration of the experience of becoming or being; what is, what exists, what it means for something or somebody to be (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000).

Leadership is often viewed as the lifeblood of an organization. Without it, little gets done and organizations run the risk of wandering in circles, headed nowhere. Leadership in the emergency services is not only vital, but may be the key to success.

Anecdotally, many people observe a good military or emergency scene commander in operation and call them a good leader. While they may be a good leader, what the person is identifying is a good manager. Most people can be taught to manage a good scene/operation, but it is what is done before and after the incident where leadership seems most important. Arguably, good leadership leads to effective and efficient incident management. Emergency services' educators must learn not only how to teach leadership, but how to allow students to experience it.

The sole objective of this ontological approach to creating leaders is to leave students who complete a course designed to create leaders actually being leaders and exercising leadership effectively as their natural self-expression. In other words, the exercise of creating a leader is complete when being a leader and exercising leadership effectively has become that student's natural self-expression. By "natural self-expression" as it is used in the previous sentences we mean a way of being and acting in any leadership situation that is a spontaneous and intuitive effective response to what one is dealing with (Erhard, Jensen, & Granger, 2010, p. 1).

Leadership under emergent situations is compounded by time, pressure, and consequence. This creates a different kind of pressure to perform, yet does not have the luxury of reflection, contemplation and long-term analysis. So, using the traditional means of teaching leadership (presenting leadership theories, case studies, etc.) may not be effective and should be explored through the context of the lived experience. Bennis (2009) stated: "I tend to think of the differences between leaders and managers as the differences between those who master the context and those who surrender to it" (p. 41). Anecdotal observation posits this is generally true for leadership in the emergency or disaster. So, what is it that makes a good emergency services leader?

Kellerman (2012) contends that the leadership industry has been thriving, growing and prospering. Yet, leaders by and large are performing poorly, worse in many ways than before. However, leadership is holistic, not prescriptive. As Kellerman (2012) asserts in her book, the leadership-training trend is somewhat nascent and based on the belief that anyone can become a leader if they take a few classes and apply a few principles. As she points out, this does not seem to be necessarily true.

As stated above, most educational pedagogies are based in the epistemological or theoretical domains. Journals and textbooks on leadership are replete with theories and explanations of attributes and behaviors extrapolated from observation and empirical study of recognized leaders. Northouse (2016) offers an overview of leadership theories and approaches; they are: 1) trait approach, 2) skills approach, 3) behavioral approach, 4) situational approach, 5) path-goal theory, 6) leader-member exchange; 7) transformational leadership, 8) authentic leadership, 9) servant leadership, 10) adaptive leadership, and 12) psychodynamic approach.

Most of these theories are empirically studied and presented as ways to develop leaders. As van Manen (1990) suggests, we need to understand human experience, not define it. Moreover, because we are dealing with the dynamics of being human, leadership is a subjective not objective experience. It is customary to study, survey, quantify and statistically analyze formative and summative results of various leadership strategies. However, this does not tell us how they work – how one leader is able to get results that another leader does not using the same strategies. Applying strategies or theories is only part of the leadership equation. If we are to truly study leadership, we need to approach it by understanding the lived experience of leaders in normal and exigent circumstances.

What is the experience of leadership approached from the leader perspective? As the work of Bennis (2009) alludes, literature often talks about becoming leaders, but is still unclear as to when one actually “becomes” a leader. That thought led to the question of this study: What is the experience of being a leader in the public and emergency services disciplines?

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

As stated above, leadership in emergent or exigent circumstances does not have the luxury of reflection, contemplation and long-term analysis. It is relatively easy to lead people to where they already desire to be when times are calm. Yet, an effective leader realizes his/her position is more than just being in charge (Henman, 2010). So, leadership in the emergency services and/or public arenas is similar to leadership in the private sector except in exigent circumstances (Gill, 2009). However, creating confidence for the followers is difficult in the spur of the moment. Confidence in the leader’s decisions is dependent on the quality of past decision-making and/or influence.

The under-focus on leadership decisions may have resulted in a partial misspecification of the behavioral foundation of leadership. Many observers have concluded that organizational leadership calls for at least four major attributes; strategic thinking about the organization’s environment, mobilization of its resources to achieve its strategy, execution of the strategy, and selflessness. (see, e.g., Bennis, 2003; Bossidy & Charan, 2002; Collins, 2001; Gardner, 1993; George, 2003; Tichy, 1997; Useem, 1998)

Yet a leader’s personal reputation for these qualities may largely depend on the quality of the underlying decisions he or she has previously taken. Thinking strategically depends on making good decisions ... If the leader’s decisions have been made well, they come to constitute what we often attribute to the leader as strategic thinking, resource mobilization, effective execution, and personal selflessness. If taken poorly, by contrast, the leader’s decisions diminish these same four defining attributes of leadership. (Useem, Cook, & Sutton, 2005, pp.463–464)

Authenticity/legitimacy gained from prior decision-making successes appears as a social affect central to leader effectiveness (Tyler & Lind, 1992).

**Leadership ontology.** Leadership epistemology is much of the focus in leadership research. Most of the research appears undertaken from the perspective of followership – the willingness of followers to be led. These explorations have led to the development of the leadership theories taught in leadership and management courses. However, this creates a deficit in the ability to apply what is learned (Bearance & Holmes, 2015). Failing to understand the experiential mind and how it influences the rational mind undermines effectiveness. Cultivating both the experiential and theoretical minds allows for greater wisdom in the individual (Chisholm, Harries, Northwood, & Johrendt, 2009).

**Metacognition.** Learning and growth take place through a process of understanding how one learns (metacognition) and reflecting on that knowledge and experience as part of a learning schema (Maxfield, 2008). Metacognition is an applicable and appropriate tool for a leader. The leader understands his/her unique learning processes, after reflecting on his/her vast reservoir of experience (Livingston, 1997).

**Reflective learning.** Peter Jarvis, a British researcher, theorized about the process of learning and growth through social experience and reflectivity. The premise of Jarvis' learning process model is that experience requires some reflective action and application for growth and development (Maxfield, 2008).

Merriam and Cafferella (1999) present Jarvis' nine different routes or responses to social experience.

1. Presumption – mechanical response or a presumption that what has previously worked will work again.
  2. Nonconsideration – too preoccupied with something else to even consider the experience.
  3. Rejection – a conscious choice to reject the opportunity to learn.
  4. Preconscious – a person unconsciously internalizes something.
  5. Practice – practice a new skill until it is learned.
  6. Memorization – acquire information with which they have been presented and learn it so it can be reproduced at a later time.
  7. Contemplation – thinking about what is being learned.
  8. Reflective practice – similar to problem solving.
  9. Experimental learning – actually experimenting on one's environment.
- (p. 284)

Experiential learning through reflection encourages leaders to engage in reflective practices and then generalize the information for inclusion into one's life/learning schema (Lamm, Cannon, Roberts, Irani, Snyder, Brendemuhl, & Rodriguez, 2011). Kolb (1984) also offers four learning stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observations, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active

experimentation (which also follows Jarvis' model shown above).

Schön brought the idea of reflectivity to the forefront. His work asserts that the practitioner allows him or herself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion from an uncertain situation. He or she then reflects on the situation or phenomenon, through which this reflection brings new understanding, growth, and learning (Schön, 1983).

## METHODOLOGY

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology used to explore and interpret deep human experiences (Creswell, 1998). In short, phenomenology is a discipline that provides access to being and action as a first-person experience or phenomena (Erhard et al., 2010; Husserl, 1927). This study explored the lived experiences of emergency services leaders, so a hermeneutic phenomenological design is appropriate.

Phenomenology is oriented theoretically and requires guidelines (Creswell, 1998), but does not make deductions from propositions that can be tested empirically. Rather, it demonstrates its findings/premises through descriptive analyses. By this, readers gain an understanding of how the phenomena of human perception are experienced (van Manen, 2014).

**Study Participants.** The number of participants for this study was four. They ranged in age from 40 to 57; three identified as male and one identified as female. The participants were purposely selected by the following criteria: (a) a command or executive level position; and (b) members of a fire response agency, law enforcement agency, military emergency services division, and/or a politician in local, state or national office; see Table 1.

*Table 1.* The Participants of the Study

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Organizational Position</b>	<b>Public Sector</b>
1	Chief Officer	Federal Emergency Services
2	Executive Level Chief Officer	Fire and Rescue
3	Elected Official	Political
4	Police Command Officer	Law Enforcement

After institutional IRB approval was received, selected participants were contacted and the purpose and process of the study were explained. Participant anonymity was assured, as all identifiers were removed and participants were randomly assigned a number to identify responses.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of recorded interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, in that each participant was given two questions to begin the

interview. Interviews then proceeded where the participant took it. The two initial questions given to each participant were:

- 1) Leadership is a process and state where an individual influences a group and the group agrees to the influence of the individual in order to reach a desired ideal or vision. Do you agree with this definition or not and why or why not?
- 2) When did you first realize you had become a leader, and what led you to that discovery?

From that point, the interview progressed where it would, without guidance from the interviewer. Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. Copies of the transcriptions were sent to the correlating participant for review or clarification before the process of data analysis continued.

### DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis began as soon as the first interview was conducted and continued throughout the duration of the study. A constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data. Because qualitative research is an emerging process, the purpose and the questions asked were dynamic and revisions made based upon the responses and feedback of the participants (Creswell, 2009).

**Verification.** Trustworthiness is reasonably assured in qualitative research through verification and acceptable standards of quality (Creswell, 1998). These standards were applied throughout analysis. Member checks were an ongoing process. As data were interpreted and the coding process was conducted, periodic contact with the participants, if needed, was done to clarify the participant's meaning regarding his/her interview responses. Once the data had been analyzed and interpreted, a final member check was completed to assure that member intent had been maintained, a critical step for establishing credibility (Creswell, 1998).

**Limitations.** This study explored the perceptions and experiences of only one group of leaders in the emergency services and/or public arenas. The study participants provided a rich sample of perceptions and experiences, but there is no way of presenting or representing all possible experiences. Therefore, transferability of the results of this study is left to the judgment and perceptions of the reader.

### RESULTS

Three themes emerged as a common lived-experience of the participants. These themes were: (a) self-awareness of legitimacy, (b) self-regulation through ethical/value-based leadership, and (c) leader affect through emotional intelligence. Each of these themes was prevalent in the responses from the participants and explored in the sample narratives which follow. For brevity, only selected responses were used to exemplify the themes in this section.

**Self-awareness of legitimacy.** Self-awareness of legitimacy, as revealed in these interviews, did not mean that leader legitimacy was derived through holding a position of authority, but through experience, education, attention to detail and awareness or recognitions of the ability to influence. Bennis (2009) asserts that components of leadership cannot be taught, they must be learned and leaders are made as much by understanding and application of experiences as by skills. Further, Gardner, Avolio, and Walumbwa (2005) posit authentic leadership is characterized by two components: 1) self-awareness and 2) self-regulation. This seemed to be borne out by the responses of the participants, particularly in the first two themes.

Each of the participants shared reflections of how they gained that “authenticity or legitimacy” through self-awareness and recognition of the phenomena. Participant 1 shared the following:

*But, when you actually recognize that you have the, the trust of someone, they'll come to you with more than just completing the task. They'll come to you with recommendations with how to complete the task; recommendations either along the way or recommendations afterwards for improvement. So, I think trust. When you recognize that you have you have trust from those below you and those above you, I think that's when you actually recognize that you um, that you are at that point.*

Similar to this, Participant 2 offered his view on legitimacy in the following expression.

*I think, I think for as long as I can remember in a way I've felt that I was leader and I think part of that has come from knowing myself and knowing that, that I had a set of values that I would stick to; knowing that I can communicate with others – maybe not consciously seeing people follow me, but knowing that I could influence people and that people were emulating me sometimes, trying to mirror certain things that I was doing. I can think back in Little League baseball being on a baseball team, knowing I was leader on the team. Not because I was the team captain or the whatever, but I think just in my interactions with other people it became evident to me. The way the coaches treated me; the way they sought my input for things and it was a back-and-forth thing. I think, I remember specifically ... how this ties into leadership I don't know. I think it was the back-and-forth between me and the coach. I remember we had signals for stealing bases or taking a pitch or bunting or whatever, and the coach had said – I don't remember exactly, but it was like if he touched the brim of his hat – oh I remember what it was. He said if you're on base and I call you by the wrong name, that means steal. He had just let mentioned once in practice and I remember leading off on the base and he said something like, “Come on Ronny let's go.” and so I did. And I remember looking at him and I don't know if he gave me a “thumbs up” or whatever but I remember there was this shared like “wow, he got it,” and I looked at him like, “Yeah, I picked up on it.” Yet, I don't think that kind of interaction was happening with the other players and I knew that the coach could count on me to pick up on it. So, I think there was a lot of that. There*

*were interactions with other people that led me to start to believe that there is something different and that I can influence – I am intelligent – I can help other people get things.*

Participant 3 offered this on legitimacy through awareness:

*You can't walk into a group of people and know less about the subject than they do – well that's not always the case. You might have a panel of experts and you need to get all their input – but you need to at least be knowledgeable enough to speak their language ... You have to be seen as someone who understands the issue. I prefer it if I know more than anyone else in the room (ha ha); that can't always be the case. But if I can't, I have to at least be able to discuss with them close enough to their own level that I can say, "okay I understand a, b, and c, can you walk through to x, y, and z."*

Participant 4 had a similar, but slightly different take on self-awareness:

*Well, being a manager and a leader to me are two very, very different things. I know some fantastic managers and they can't lead their way out of a paper sack. I also know some really, really super caring people that because they don't know how to get the job done they fail as a leader ... How they got into a leadership position is on the Peter Principle or dumb luck. I understand I'm a company man as a command level person in my organization, that I'm a company ... that's a manager side of me that I have to ... there's things that need to be done and I mean, there are leadership principles you can employ in developing a budget, but it's more making sure the proper staffing.*

**Self-regulation through ethical and value-based leadership.** The second theme was self-regulation through ethical and value-based leadership. This held prominence in the responses of all participants. Participant 4 expressed: *"I think leaders show, and should show, what can, not just what should be done, but what can be done."*

Participant 1 was adamant about trust and other value-based leadership by offering: *"So, I think the biggest thing that stands out is at what point did I realize – and it's also I think what led me – was trust; trust from below and trust from above."*

Participant 3 talked more about ethics and offered:

*I think it is, I think it is because if you don't have some common values somewhere in the group you have a very hard time defining what success – deciding what it is that the group wants or needs to accomplish. For me, when I talk about the ethics of it, those things don't change. I like to think that I'm appealing to people with similar ethics. If I realize that I'm not, then my ethics don't change, but how I interact with them does.*

Participant 2 shared the importance of knowing one's self and one's values with:

*I think I've always just felt in my heart that I was [a leader] and I think a lot of that comes from being a leader of myself, having my own set of standards and values and knowing what they were; in being able to lead myself.*

**Leader affect through emotional intelligence.** The third emerging theme was leadership affect through emotional intelligence. Leader affect could be best defined as the ability to affect followers; to allow followers to feel a sense of belonging, to see the vision of the organization or group, and to feel validated, included and empowered. This has also been identified as emotional intelligence or the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions along with the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). All participants shared feelings about this.

Participant 2 shared a conversation he had with a friend who had an interaction with one of the people working under the supervision of Participant 2:

*I think it's a combination of couple things. I think number one, like I said, a lot of it has to do with who I am, and myself, and how I represent myself. I think they pick up on that and you know just in the manner of dress, in the manner of the way you talk to people, the way you treat people – that kind of stuff. I think, I think the other thing goes back to communication as well, and being able to communicate with others. Again, not just with words but with how I dress and how I talk and how I treat other people. I was talking to my friend today and I was asking him if one of the fire captains of my department, who does construction work on the side, had come over to give him a bid for his basement. He told me later, that when the captain was there he said, “Yeah, Chief [-----]... the one thing is that he treats everybody fairly; doesn't judge people. He can look at a situation and just always be objective and fair about it. No matter who you are, he will treat you that way.” So, I think a lot of it is that stuff – regardless of who the individual is, what strengths or weaknesses, or whatever I'll treat them the same and help them with whatever it is they need.*

Participant 4 had similar views and shared them through a deeply held belief about how to treat followers. He offered:

*Your primary responsibility is to take care of your people. It seems like the leaders that I see that nauseate me are the ones that are far more worried about what their command thinks than taking care of their people. And if you take care of your people and that's your focus, that's your number one priorities to take care of every person; making sure that they have a good work/life balance; that they have the skills they need to be successful in the job; that they trust you; that there's trust so that there are problems or there is a situation they need help with they will come to you.*

Participant 3 had a little different viewpoint, but was still in line with the leader affect theme and shared the following:

*But, how I treat people in the group sometimes has to change depending on their behavior. So, if I cajole a group around ... it's always my preference to listen to people, to try to address their concerns, that's where I'll start. In a huge body people and I'm talking about running meetings of a thousand people, you can't always do that. I'll still start that way. I usually start by trying to put everybody at ease, whether it is a joke or a silly story about*

*myself where I am the one who looks silly, not anybody else; something to try to get them to feel comfortable with me as a leader.*

Participant 1 shared the importance of empowering people to do their job and to have confidence in their abilities. In this, people will respond to the leader affect.

*I think the first thing is letting go of, letting go of the reins. I thought that was one of the greatest compliments that I would ever get was from an Assistant Chief for instance that would say, you know, sheesh, you let me have that; you let me take control of that and I'm used to you know, the Fire Chief coming out in the middle the night to control things. And, and I think I learned that from...it was a learned behavior. I think definitely – a learned behavior – because I was frustrated with seeing that interaction as I was coming up through the ranks.*

## DISCUSSION

The three emergent themes revealed were (a) self-awareness of legitimacy, (b) self-regulation through ethical/value-based leadership, and (c) leader affect through emotional intelligence. The lived experience of these leaders came from a process of life-long study, reflection, and application of lessons learned. Each of the participants shared that they recognized very early in their lives some abilities to lead and worked to develop them through study, experimentation, reflection, and refinement. As Bennis (2009) asserted, these things could not be taught, but had to be learned.

Weischer, Weibler, and Petersen (2013, p. 477) offer the following thoughts on the importance of authenticity: “Among various prevailing leadership theories that tend to emphasize integrity, morality, and honesty” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Greenleaf, 2002; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000), “authenticity has played a dominant role over the last decade” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

The theme of self-awareness of legitimacy in this study supports the concepts of authentic leadership theory (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). The experiences shared by the participants gave their perspective on what they believe gives them the legitimacy and authenticity in the eyes of their followers, which is centered in living their own values and understanding who they were (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Petersen, 2008).

With the more recent scandals and ethical/moral failures of public and corporate leaders, there is a plethora of new value-based leadership constructs (Copeland, 2014). The study participants' lived experiences exemplified the importance of those constructs, especially in the emergency services and public domains. As a society, we have been enamored with charisma and fame over the last few decades, only to be disappointed time after time (Maxfield & Broome, 2014). Copeland (2014) reinforced this idea with the following:

It became clear that in order to restore hope, confidence, integrity and honor to leaders and organizations, leadership theorist argued that entities

needed to look beyond the persuasive lure of a charismatic, ostensibly transformational leader and ensure that leaders also possessed a strong set of values, morals and ethics. (p. 106)

The participants' understanding of their lived experience reinforced this concept. They expressed that success was grounded, in part, by self-regulation of moral and ethical behavior.

The third theme of this study was leader affect through emotional intelligence. Successful leaders tend to attract followers who want to be around them or with them (Ingram & Cangemi, 2012). Without identifying it as such, all participants relayed the importance of emotional intelligence in their leadership experiences. Each leader asserted that understanding followers' needs, treating followers with respect and empowering followers were key to their success. Leadership supports and guides followers to achieve success (Ingram & Cangemi, 2012).

The three emergent themes also support portions the **LEAP** leadership model presented by Maxfield, Broome, and Fisher (2015). Their model posits that leaders exhibit the following attributes: (1) **L**egitimacy – a leader has legitimate (authentic) power, knowledge, skill and ability developed through his or her work, experience, education, and attention to detail; (2) **E**thics – a good leader has strong character, strong values, and makes ethical decisions when confronted with choices and/or dilemmas; (3) **A**ffective – a good leader has the ability to instill, trust, confidence, emotion, passion, and create vision with others; and, (4) **P**ersistence – a good leader does not give up when times are tough or there is resistance to a righteous idea or plan, but rather shows determination in achieving goals and objectives.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this phenomenological study uncovered the attitudes and perspectives of the lived experiences of public and emergency services leaders. The results reinforced the notion that leadership is learned through ontology as well as epistemology. The ontological model of leadership uncovers the nature of being a leader and opens up and reveals the source of leader actions (Ernhard et al., 2010).

The post-phenomena reflections and narratives of the participants brought forth the importance of knowing one's self, one's values, and the importance of serving the other (follower). The growth from becoming a leader to being a leader was exposed, which affirms the concept of self-actualization. "This transcendence leads to the leader's self-actualization" (Conley, 2007; Maslow, 1965); additionally, "the self-actualized leader realizes greater authority, strength, and success" (Greenleaf, 1996; Russell, 2016; Sendjaya, 2015) [Russell, Maxfield, & Russell, 2017]. The implications from this study show that experimentation, experience, reflection, emotional intelligence and application are important for leader development. Therefore, developing pedagogies that do not just introduce epistemologies, but rather give opportunities for lived experience (ontologies)

enhances the potential success of leaders. Further research into these concepts is strongly suggested and experimentation with new pedagogical methods should provide interesting and hopefully, strong results.

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