

COMMON SENSE LEADERSHIP: EVIDENCE FROM SENIOR LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is call for further academic conversations into how to recognize common sense leadership as it relates to the 21st century organization. This qualitative study was performed from July 29th through December 7th, 2010, which involved 26 participants from across the United States who were identified as senior leaders in their organization. These executives indicated that common sense leadership is a multi-pronged approach that requires flexibility to address both the needs and desires of the organization in conjunction with those of the members of the organization. Participants concluded that common sense decision making requires a sense of morality that sometimes supersedes organizational performance and profitability. Finally, study participants strongly believe that employee motivation that encompasses goal attainment and decision making, through a sense of morality, are important benchmarks in being a common sense leader.

JEL: M1

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Common Sense

INTRODUCTION

Much like the definition of leadership, there is not one common word or phrase that seems to best describe what common sense is all about, just what attributes are encompassed in that term. With a plethora of human relations theories on better managing one's human assets, the researchers wanted to know why there seemed to be a missing hitch to connect these ideas so actual practice was engaged. Our study sought to find broad categorizations of what common sense can be identified as encompassing among senior leaders across multiple disciplines and various locations across the United States. What we discovered was that most of the senior leaders identified three broad areas where common sense practice appeared most in their organization. Decision Making was the most prominent areas identified with 46% of the comments in that area; Motivation was noted in 29% of the opinions expressed; and Goal Setting concepts came in at a close third at 25% of the classifications.

In the exploration of this study, the researchers discovered that a general conceptual recognition of common sense leadership was held among a diverse and wide-ranging population sample. Although a single clear-cut definitive explanation of common sense leadership is still elusive, a more defined parameter of what it is not was determined. This finding matches what is noted in the current literature where there are disparate opinions on whether common sense exists in the first place and, if so, how one identifies it outside of a cultural context. Our work adds to the existing literature by suggesting common sense decision making requires a sense of morality that sometimes supersedes organizational performance and profitability.

The following summarizes the findings of those who took part in this initial inquiry, which then can be used as a starting point for further dialogue among those who might pioneer this concept. The paper presents a rational approach format, proceeding from a discussion of the research background, followed

by a review of the literature. Data and methodology are then presented, with a discussion of the study's findings and recommendations for future study.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The study began with the assumption there must be a common set of terminology that could be used to define common sense as it relates to organizations. After reviewing the literature, conversing with colleagues, and considering the data collected, the researchers discovered this is an impossible task to complete. The one certainty about the definition of common sense leadership is there is no single quantifiable measurement that could tell us how to define the term. Everyone seems to recognize its attributes in practice, much like one could differentiate the famous contour design of the Coca-Cola bottle from one that came from one of its competitors. Common sense leadership follows the same pattern because people can tell you what it is without being able to correlate the term to a single benchmark or paradigm.

Observations were made following leadership conferences in Eastern Europe in the early 21st century that attendees were eager to embrace a Western leadership style but often did not show their comprehension of how such principles could be applied in a practical, organizational setting. Much of this resistance was because of the participants' past experiences in a Communist worldview setting where such an approach was forbidden. Even after democratic reforms were initiated, the old paradigm of leadership could not be easily shaken from emerging organizational leaders who openly stated they wanted to find a new paradigm to do their business but did not know where to begin the process.

Further observations among United States leadership conference attendees, whom had already practiced the skills that the Eastern Europe attendees hoped for, seemed to show a similar pattern of participants wanting to embrace a different style. Yet, barriers seemed to be in place, so the application of new paradigms was hindered. It appeared that while there was a will to make an organizational leadership style change, there was a missing element that did not allow these leaders to take the principles learned from theory into practice. A final consideration was the plethora of styles that are available for leaders to emulate in their organizations: beginning with Taylor and the scientific management movement (1890-1940), followed by Weber's bureaucratic management approach (1930-1950), and then Mayo and Roethlisberger (Hawthorne study), McGregor (Theory X and Theory Y), and other notable researchers' involvement in the human relations movement studies (1930-today).

What seemed to connect these observations to the researchers was the notion of common sense and its ability to serve as the hitching mechanism to connect individuals and their organizations to the desired principle of operations. Without common sense, it seemed the parties could appreciate the appearance of the desired principles from a distance but could not have a full connection to them in order to move the paradigm forward personally or organizationally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a literature gap involving common sense and the areas of leadership and organizational behavior in general. The topic is mostly identified within the context of the political arena and whether someone's actions are appropriate or not. However, since 2000, the notion of common sense leadership as it relates to organizational behavior is almost a quiet topic by theorists in the field.

Fletcher (1984) believed common sense is a component of common understandings about the environment consisting of three points. First, common sense unites underlying presuppositions about the environment (Goodwin, 2009). Second, common sense consists of a group of shared opinions about the

environment (Goodwin). Finally, common sense is a shared “way of thinking” about the environment (Fletcher, 1984, p. 204).

Salter and Highhouse (2009) relate common sense within the context of situational judgment. They note there are eight schools of thought in this area starting with File (1945) and continuing through Brooks and Highhouse (2006); Motowidlo, Hooper, and Jackson (2006); and Stemler and Sternberg (2006). Salter and Highhouse note there is a commonality in how each of these scholars defined situational judgment such that “good judgment does not exist in a vacuum; it usually occurs in the context of other people or situations” (p. 394). The Situational Leadership Model, developed by Hersey and Blanchard, postulated that leaders maximize their opportunity for success by adapting style to the specific situation based on the skills, abilities and desires of the followers (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2007; Newstrom & Davis, 2007; Pechlivanidis & Katsimpra, 2004). The seminal research seems to point to the notion that there is a connection between common sense and its relationship with familiar experiences of people in a grouping. Salter and Highhouse (2009) further state that situational judgment (what this study calls common sense) is a qualitative determination where factual and procedural knowledge are used to discover how others will respond to various circumstances. This is perhaps why there are differing definitions of what common sense is, given it is not a measure that can be quantified because of its amoebic, ever changing nature. What might be considered common sense by one person now may not be deemed as such by later investigations because of what Polanyi (1966) called *tacit knowledge* or what one learns from past experiences, which are not always quantified or recorded for later review.

Moon (2009) relates the importance of common sense study to change management particulars. He links the need for common sense as a means to “pass stakeholders’ common sense ‘sniff tests’” (p. 518). Moon further notes “stakeholders are less likely to adopt change when their common sense perspectives are violated” (p. 518). Kaler (2006) believes that properly managing stakeholders for any kind of an organization focuses on the ability to address the needs of more than corporate profits and the growth of shareholder wealth. Managing in the 21st century requires a much broader thinking concerning the ramifications that organizational decisions have on the overall environment (Harrison & St. John, 1996). Effective management of a wide range of stakeholders requires leaders to identify each type of stakeholder that could influence the direction of the organization and their specific expectations (Harrison & St. John, 1996). Rigsby and Greco (2003) believe that leaders with a creative and unique vision look beyond the obvious needs of the organization towards an uncharted future. Leaders who fail to recognize the tangible and intangible future of any stakeholder, individual, group or environment creates a detrimental atmosphere where failure becomes a possibility (Wallace, 1995). Thus, common sense becomes a benchmark that is “so clearly self-evident and to think/do otherwise would obviously be folly” (Moon, personal communication, April 28, 2011). In this context, common sense then becomes a group norm that is transformed from what one person thinks to something that is embraced by other members of the organization.

Clawson (2009) believes that one needs to consider common sense from a broader perspective because “managers who are unable to review and adjust their common sense are not likely to be effective managers locally or globally” (p. 470) He notes the reason why leaders cannot come to a firm definition is because “people draw conclusions based on vague values, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations they have about the way the world is or should be” (Clawson, personal communication, April 26, 2011). Clawson also sees common sense as being a local or global perspective rather than something identified by all who understand the term (2011).

Rausch (2009) notes that while there have been myriad leadership publications a general consensus on the meaning of common sense has not been reached among scholars and practitioners. What can be agreed on, though, is there is a positive relationship between common sense and how one is thought to make

sound decisions on any given matter (Rausch). That is accomplished in the organizational setting through the communication of the leader's values.

Zhao (2009) makes an important observation on common leadership when he notes, as others, that it seems common sense is a self-evident concept espoused by practitioners, which then ends further discussion. However, opinions about what the term *common sense* includes are more “about effectiveness, not about science” (Zhao, 2009, p. 449). Zhao goes on to connect those who are proponents of common sense leadership to a “response to arbitrary and bureaucratic management, and useless complicated or dogmatic procedures” (p. 449).

What is interesting in the literature is common sense is recognized as having an imprint on organizational behavior (Goodwin, 2009; Moon, 2009; Rausch, 2009; Salter & Highhouse, 2009; and Zhao, 2009). However, common sense serves as an intangible qualifier that people can see the effects of without being able to hold it in their hands, much like the wind. Yet, common sense is no less important to organizational survival and the ability of managers to make prudent decisions that could lead to success or failure based on how these actions are implemented and grasped by their followers.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study on recognizing common sense as it relates to the 21st century organization was undertaken from July 29th through December 7th, 2010. It involved 26 participants who were identified as senior leaders in their organizations (Vice-President and higher on the organizational chart). The convenience sample included individuals from both the public and private sector and included leaders from information technology, insurance, investment, legal services, manufacturing, marketing, public utilities, real estate, restaurants, and staffing. Participants were polled from Georgia (50%), Nevada (23%) and other regions of the United States (Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania); using SurveyMonkey.com as the platform for respondents to record their complete comments (see Appendix A). The participants were asked to respond to two questions for two proposed studies. The following question guided this study: How would you define common sense as it relates to leading a 21st century organization? A future study will address the results of the other question: What are some common sense, best practice leadership examples you could provide from your lived experiences as a senior executive?

FINDINGS

It was not difficult for these senior-level leaders to identify how common sense leadership was recognized, although there was no single broad category that could be used to delineate the meaning of the term. Instead, three predominant groupings were produced from the data, which seemed to guide the participants' perceptions of what common sense leadership means in their organization: (a) goal setting, (b) decision making, and (c) motivation. Figure 1 shows where the participants identified common sense leadership (CSL) showing up within these three broad categories.

Goal Setting

Opinions about common sense as they relate to operational issues fell within three broad groupings: mission, vision, and purpose. Within those areas, participants identified two specific subsets: recognition and getting back to basics.

Figure 1: The Breakdown of Participants’ Definition of Common Sense Leadership

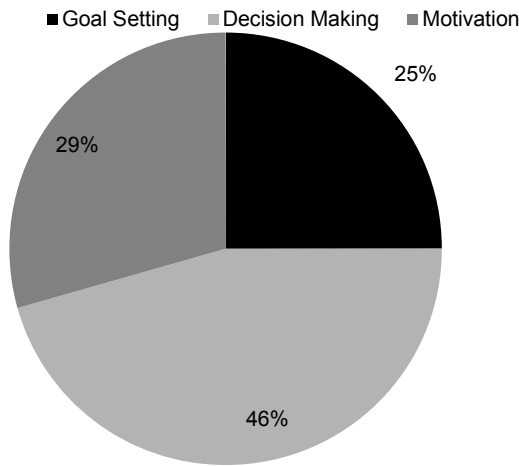


Figure 2: Areas of leadership identification groupings.

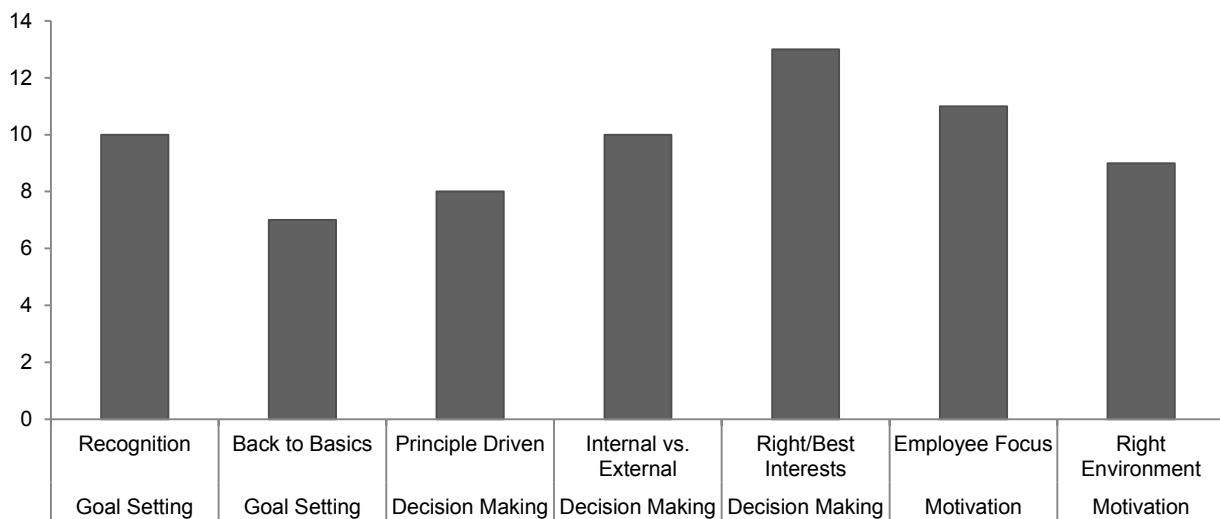


Figure 2 delineates each category into specific groupings, which help leaders define where common sense leadership characteristics appear most in their organization.

Recognition

Participants noted that common sense starts within the proper mindset of what is happening in the organization. CS7 opined that meant the leader needs to have an “innate ability to recognize issues and processes within a business structure and address them accordingly.” That perspective was echoed by CS23 added that commons sense realizes this in the context of “social environments in which a person operates. Common sense includes a personal feel for the operations of a business, knowledge of the external environment in which the business exists, and understanding of the social dynamics that exist within the organization.” In other words, common sense operates within an amoebic kind of environment where all parts are connected, blended together, and flowing together in tandem within the parameters of mission, vision, and purpose. CS13 adds, “Since the state of man is such that he is constantly searching

to find his meaning and purpose, common sense would dictate that a leader be able to provide/communicate, in part, this meaning and purpose to the individual in an organization.”

Other participants in this study noted a similar connection as they saw how common sense relates to “the absolute understanding of your business model and processes” (CS25). CS8 attributed common sense to the leader’s “ability to assess reality.” CS20 viewed the pursuit of using common sense in the context of “vision expressed daily. Efficiency tweaked daily. Productivity measured daily. Relevance to customer needs examined daily.” Common sense then would be bounded by observing what has been done in the past, looking to what the organization is experiencing now, and looking to the realities of the future in almost a simultaneous set of activities by the leader.

The notion of common sense was also framed within the ideal of knowing what tools are available to the leader. CS26 defined this area as “a set of mental tools that guide a person through the decision process to a point where the obstacles have been analyzed, potential solutions have been outlined with different consequences thought through, and then reasoning the way to the best solution.” Instead of describing a situation where one tool fits all leaders, common sense then would seem to relate to the recognition that there are differing ways to use those devices and arrive at varying solutions, which may be beneficial to the organization. At least that is what CS26 seems to indicate when it was opined that leaders in the 21st century “will have to accommodate people in leadership positions who have a different common sense matrix than has been thought of as traditional common sense.” The reason why that may be true is best described by CS13 who posited that “common sense is that set of intuitions, biases, and perceptions which are taken for granted by the one who possesses them.” If one thinks that a leadership tool has only one use then there may be a surprise when that device ends up having different uses by those who do not see common sense leadership within a narrow set of definitions. However, the study of leadership is challenged because CS26 also noted that “what makes it harder is that we now have two generations who have developed a different sort of common sense as a result of a different upbringing.” Intergenerational differences need to be considered when determining what is or is not defined as common sense leadership in the 21st century.

Back to Basics

Aligned with mission, vision, and purpose issues are where participants felt common sense leadership begins in an organization. CS3 sees the genesis of such understanding starting by “getting back to the basics of setting measurable and attainable goals.” Only when the leader knows their true north coordinates will the organization be able to know the clear direction they want to follow without being distracted by alternative opinions from those who are following an outdated map of operations. CS25 added that common sense is more than just the leader knowing where the organization is heading but they also possess “the ability to know that all processes and functions are working properly or improperly. This applies to everything from software to human resources.” When a leader is confident that they have marked a clear path for the rest of the organization to follow behind them and all known and needed resources are in place then the participants believe common sense is being used optimally.

Participants noted that common sense relates to the ability of a leader to offer “the product or service in a way that is easy to understand, purchase, and see the value of the product or service” (CS22). The reason is that, as CS25 noted, “Without understanding how your organization is built and functions you cannot see if something is amiss.” If a leader is able to have such focus then CS3 suggests that one can pursue “those goals without being impacted by noise or emotional drivers. Too often these days, plans are created and decisions are made with drivers that are contrary or not related to success.” That is why the participants may have been focused mostly on mission, vision, and purpose because as CS8 views common sense in leadership, one has to “develop a plan, and present and sell that plan to achieve your objectives.”

Decision-Making

Opinions about common sense as it relates to decision-making fell into broad principle-driven considerations. Common sense, according to the participants, is based on internal drivers rather than outside factors that may affect the leader. CS2 notes common sense is “experienced based decisions that are not driven by politics.” The leader in such cases will look at situations as doing what is right first while looking out for the best interests of the organization. CS14 says this process all begins by knowing your customer and what their expectations may be. CS15 sees common sense as “looking past numbers to do the right thing for employees, customers, and shareholders.” CS11 agrees with that notion and further states that common sense is “acting in a way that positively affects company goals while appearing to stakeholders to be the most appropriate approach.” CS24 added that “common sense as it relates to leading a 21st century organization is best defined as doing the right thing at the right time with resources--time, people, money and information.” Common sense then is formed as CS24 described “a fail-safe, flexible model for action that results in obtaining the key objectives of the organization consistently” while doing the right thing every time. CS10 connected common sense leadership to “doing what is right by leveraging personal and professional experiences” rather than what someone else wants you to do.

Many of the participants equated common sense to moral decision making. CS5 said this relates to “using your moral compass to make decisions and following the ‘do unto others’ principle.” The core question that leaders would then need to answer would be, “Is what you are considering something that you would personally feel right about, and would you be proud to talk about it to others?” (CS17). CS4 notes that leaders should “try to perceive the outcome of their action(s) and determine if they would be happy with that result.” CS19 believes the answer follows one’s practice of “simply doing the right thing even when it is often not the easy thing to do. Lead by example. Practice what you preach.” By setting the right example in their organizations, leaders can show common sense that can be emulated by their followers.

Several participants noted that the benchmark for common sense activity in organizations is “actually a matter of aligning our lives with timeless principles” (CS21). CS7 stated a similar observation that “one’s moral/ethical beliefs play an important part in how these things are addressed.” The end-result according to CS12 is that “common sense and doing what is right is what leaders do to grow their fruit stands into factories.”

Motivation

Opinions about common sense as it relates to motivation fell within two broad groupings: employee focus and the setting up the right environment. Both seem to work in tandem with each other to encourage further common sense practice and application within established organizational norms.

Employee Focus

Another element that participants said would apply to common sense leadership relates to human capital considerations. CS3 believes the starting place for common sense leadership in this area begins with “assembling a team of people with a track record of success.” Common sense then would include the leader knowing who the right people are to move the organization ahead, understanding their availability for hire, and making sure the targeted individuals have gained success within similar areas of operations. Once the human assets are in place, CS1 believes one starts by first having the mindset of caring about the people who are employed by your organization.

At the very base of common sense in leadership is how to motivate your employees so they will maintain a long and productive relationship with your organization. CS9 says it begins with praising and rewarding “employees for the good work they do - take care of the employees and the bottom line will take care of itself.” At the core of commonsense and motivation is what CS13 sees as “an endowment given to all mankind in varying degrees. It is a subjective, non-material object, which can only be measured and defined in relationship with something else. Since organizational leadership is necessarily people-driven, common sense possessed by the leader of any organization will be marked by his seemingly 'natural' ability to understand what motivates people.” CS1 notes that also means knowing that “the employees of the company are people first, employees second.” CS12 puts the onus for that on leaders as they show their “understanding that people work with people, not for people.” The nuance there is one of use as being proactive vs. reactive in how it is approached.

CS18 notes that empowerment is a part of what happens because “common sense consists of understanding the unique ways in which the members of your organization can be enabled to be part of a team effort to achieve worthy goals.” CS6 concurs by noting “common sense is the ability to look at more than one party’s perspective on an issue or subject and make reasonable decisions based on that.” How a leader can reach that level of understand comes by “realizing that people are the base of our services, products, technology, etc... and the only value your company has is the quality of employees” (CS15). CS14 adds that common sense means “treating employees and customers fairly,” which seems to be the hallmark of what the participants said best defined common sense in this area of inquiry.

Setting the Right Environment

Several participants who noted that setting the right environment was a consideration described a smaller area of consideration of what common sense means as it relates to motivation. CS1 noted that getting employees to “ride for the brand” needs to be emphasized. The goal in such work would be to engage employees in activities that would move the brand forward while concurrently recognizing the followers’ individual work in doing so. CS12 believes that means to “try to make all areas ‘win/win’ situations” for leaders and their followers. CS13 posits that “at a basic level, leadership is a function of an individual's ability to intrinsically motivate people to work together to make a vision reality. Organizations exist around a common purpose, and it is the job of the leader to help people in an organization understands and cares about the purpose.” By doing so, the work environment will thrive and survive in whatever challenges it may face from its stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

According to Fletcher (1984), common sense leadership focuses on organizational environment. A single answer to define common sense leadership is not possible because senior level management has a number of different points-of-view. Summarizing the results of this study categorize common sense leadership into three areas: (a) goal setting, (b) decision making and (c) employee motivation.

Kinicki and Kreitner (2010) believe that setting goals requires a “clear line of sight” in order to lead a 21st century organization (p. 245). Furthermore, common sense leaders differentiate between performance outcome goals and learning goals (Kinicki & Kreitner). CS3 believed that common sense requires the leader to “set measureable and attainable goals.” The results of this study indicate that leader flexibility adapting to the ever-changing environment is critical to being a common sense leader. According to CS26, leaders in the 21st century “will have to accommodate people in leadership position who have a different common sense matrix than has been thought of as traditional common sense.” Maintaining a flexible view of both the environment and the members of the environment is the first indication of 21st century common sense leadership.

The second of the three areas of common sense leadership concerns the decision making process used by 21st century leaders. It is important that the reader understand that decision making in modern organizations follow one of two directions: (a) rational or (b) nonrational. According to Kinicki and Kreitner (2010), the rational approach to decision making requires the leader to solve problems by following a process that examines all potential alternatives before making a final decision. Participants in the current study indicate that a moral compass in choosing a direction for an organization is an important component of being a common sense leader. The central focus of this moral compass is the ability to inspire. Inspirational leaders expand their credibility by engaging their followers into accepting new responsibilities necessary for goal attainment (Bass & Avolio, 2002; Bass, 2003). CS24 believed that “common sense, as it relates to leading a 21st century organization, is best defined as doing the right thing at the right time with resources, time, people, money and information.” This study concluded that true common sense leadership requires leaders to inspire followers while making directional choices for the organization that ethically satisfy the morality of the overall environment.

The final area of common sense leadership focuses on employee motivation. Motivating people accounts for the influential effectiveness leaders have with their followers (Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2004). Motivation theory is divided into three overall categories: (a) reinforcement theories, (b) content theories, and (c) process theories. Reinforcement theories reflect the “process of controlling an individual’s behavior by manipulating its consequences” (Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2004, p 85). Content theories focus on the needs of employees. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs measures motivation through meeting certain physiological human needs (Newstrom & Davis, 2007). Finally, process theories motivate from a more esoteric approach concentrating on behavioral influences (Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2004). CS13 views motivation and common sense leadership as a partnership between focusing on people and determining the direction required for the organization to be successful.

In summary, understanding common sense leadership is not possible from a single point-of-view. Senior level executives indicate that common sense leadership is a multi-pronged approach to 21st century organizational behavior. Common sense leaders must maintain a level of flexibility to address both the needs and desires of the organization in conjunction with those of the members of that organization. Decision making requires a sense of morality that sometimes supersedes organizational performance and profitability. Finally, study participants strongly believe that employee motivation that encompasses the previous two concepts (e.g. goal attainment and decision making) through a sense of morality is the key to being a common sense leader.

The limitations of the study are primarily the size of the sample population, which inherently precludes applying the results to the general population of senior leaders. Additionally, because the key to common sense leadership was indicated as a sense of morality, the values and ethical views of current and future leaders will significantly impact the perceptions of what is common sense leadership in the present and future workplace.

The authors suggest further study with larger and more diverse sample population, and inclusion of a variable addressing the formal business ethics training of the study participants. We also recommend engagement in a global discussion on how common sense is identified in an organizational context. Once such recognition is made, a simultaneous conversation needs to take place on best practices involving common sense leadership within an emerging transformational leadership paradigm.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Survey Instrument

Common Sense Leadership

Thank you for taking time to complete this short survey about leadership. The results will assist the researchers in opening an academic dialogue on the subject and how common sense relates to how we might train emerging leaders in our organization.

We appreciate your time and valuable insights.

Please provide the following information so we can properly categorize your answers for this study.

1. Please provide the following information so we can properly categorize your answers for this study

Job Title:

Organization Type:

State:

2. How would you define common sense as it relates to leading a 21st century organization?

3. What are some common sense, best practice leadership examples you could provide from your lived experiences as a senior executive?

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