Optimizing Leader Uniqueness: A Practice-Oriented Approach

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Leaders have a unique profile of relevant resources to draw upon when facing different situations at work. They can optimize value-added contributions and achieve desired impacts in these situations by using a systematic approach. A practice-oriented approach is offered to help leaders optimize their uniqueness in the many situations they encounter to enhance outcomes, such as performance and well-being. After presenting an Optimizing Leader Cycle and some benefits associated with this process, a seven-step process for applying this approach is provided. A real-world application of the approach with an executive is also presented. Some challenges are also offered including having leaders consider a broader array of stakeholders when considering and measuring impacts.

Keywords: leader uniqueness, resource profile, optimize, situations, impacts, performance, well-being

INTRODUCTION

While there is no complete leader for all circumstances, it is important for leaders to strive to optimize their impact across different situational contexts.[1] Given the reported high incidence of managerial leadership ineffectiveness, incompetence or abuse (Aasland, et al., 2010; Schyns & Schilling, 2013), helping leaders leverage their unique profile of relevant resources to optimize the outcomes in situations they encounter seems like the right and virtuous thing to do (Cameron, 2014; Fowers et al., 2020). These efforts will likely pay dividends for a variety of organizational stakeholders including employees, customers and leaders themselves.

Over the past three decades I have helped leaders assess and better understand their unique pool of leadership related resources that they bring to situations and how they can manage these circumstances to optimize value-added impacts for stakeholders. This work has evolved to include a systematic approach for optimizing leader uniqueness. Drawing upon diverse fields of study, this practice-oriented approach for helping leaders manage to optimize their impacts on situations and outcomes has emerged and is offered in this article.

Individual differences play an important role in shaping and influencing leader behavior (Kerns, 2015a). This area of study contributes to helping leaders better define and determine who they are as leaders. Key individual difference making factors that contribute to a leader's uniqueness include experience, personality, core values and well-being. Other preferences around which leaders uniquely differ relate to such things as learning styles, conflict management modes, work style preferences and strengths. Taken together, a leader's individual differences form a unique resource pool which can be assessed and discerningly integrated to help develop a leader's ***unique leader resource profile (ULRP)***. Conversely, a

leader's unique set of personal resources can be left to languish and not be leveraged to their full potential. Leaders who identify, understand and integrate their unique individual difference making factors into a coherent ULRP advance their chances of becoming a leader who can optimize their impact in the many situations they face to enhance outcomes such as, performance and well-being. These efforts are further advanced by creating and documenting action learning plans to guide the leader's efforts at optimally executing the ULRP.

The study of human development, especially as treated within the field of developmental psychology, offers a window from which to view a leader's development across the leader's life span. It is clear that leader development is interwoven with the continuous process of adult development (Day et al., 2009; Miscenko, et al., 2017; Riggio, 2011). Leadership development like human development across one's lifespan is not consistently positive or linear (Baltes, 1997; Day, at al., 2011). Instead, the portrait of a leader's development reveals setbacks as well as successes. This developmental perspective helps in the study and identification of impactful leader experiences that a leader has witnessed over a lifetime (Bloom et al., 2020; Kerns, 2018a). These experiences can be thematically analyzed to help create a more holistic picture of how relevant optimal behavioral episodes and situations have impacted a leader. These experiences can also help in better understanding, integrating and projecting the possible future applications of the leader's ULRP (Habermas & Kober, 2015; Heckhausen,et al., 2017; Passarelli, 2015).

The field of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship also contribute to the study of optimizing a leader's uniqueness for enhanced well-being and performance. The study of well-being enhancing practices and best possible selves, are relevant to the efforts in helping leaders become optimal performers in their leadership roles (Kelloway & Dimoff, 2017; King, 2001; Loveday et al, 2018; Roberts, et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Further, practices relating to managing time perspective, fostering engagement and strength management have proven to be impactful in helping leaders optimize performance and well-being (Kerns, 2018b; Kerns, 2010). The work that is emerging in studying prospectus also offers promise in helping leaders imagine new ways of applying their unique leader resource profiles (Seligman, et al., 2016). Helping leaders optimize their performance across diverse situational contexts is also supported by the work being done in applying flow states. Flow states help leaders boost their performance and well-being by applying their skills to challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

The recent work on growth mindsets is also important in encouraging leaders to learn new frameworks and tools to optimize their performance across diverse situational contexts (Dweck & Molden, 2017). Closely associated with this area is the work relating to leader identity and habit management (Clear, 2018; Wood et al, 2002). As leaders formulate action learning plans to help them in optimizing their uniqueness, they need to apply a growth mindset and reinforce this frame of mind by displaying productive habits which align with and strengthen their identities as leaders who bring a unique pool of relevant resources to situations to optimize the delivery of desired impacts. Overtime, leaders' actions and habits contribute to forming and shaping their identities. With focused attention on and management of leaders' ULRP, leaders can further integrate and understand their identity as it relates to optimizing their performance in varying situations. The recent work on how attentional resources impact performance also holds promise in helping strengthen our understanding of how a leader's ULRP may interact with habitual behavior and leader identity (Dalal, et al., 2020; Weiss & Merlo, 2020).

The study of the "self" at work as it relates to self-awareness and self-control/regulation directly contributes to managing one's ULRP (Anseel et al., 2018; Baumeister & Vohs, 2012; Ferris et al, 2018). Also, situational context is a core dimension of leadership and, along with situational awareness, is integral to optimizing and managing a leader's ULRP (Kerns, 2015b; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). In order to optimally manage one's ULRP, leaders need to practice self and situational awareness while using self-control, as needed, to competently express their uniqueness in the just right amounts that match the demands of the situation (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010). Optimizing leader uniqueness requires the leader to be self-aware, situationally astute and in control of the way in which the leader responds to situations.

This article is intended to provide an approach for practitioners to adapt and for applied researchers to investigate further. The important topic of optimizing leader uniqueness is explored using information gleaned from the "real world" (Locke, 2007, Locke & Cooper, 2000). The approach offered is supported
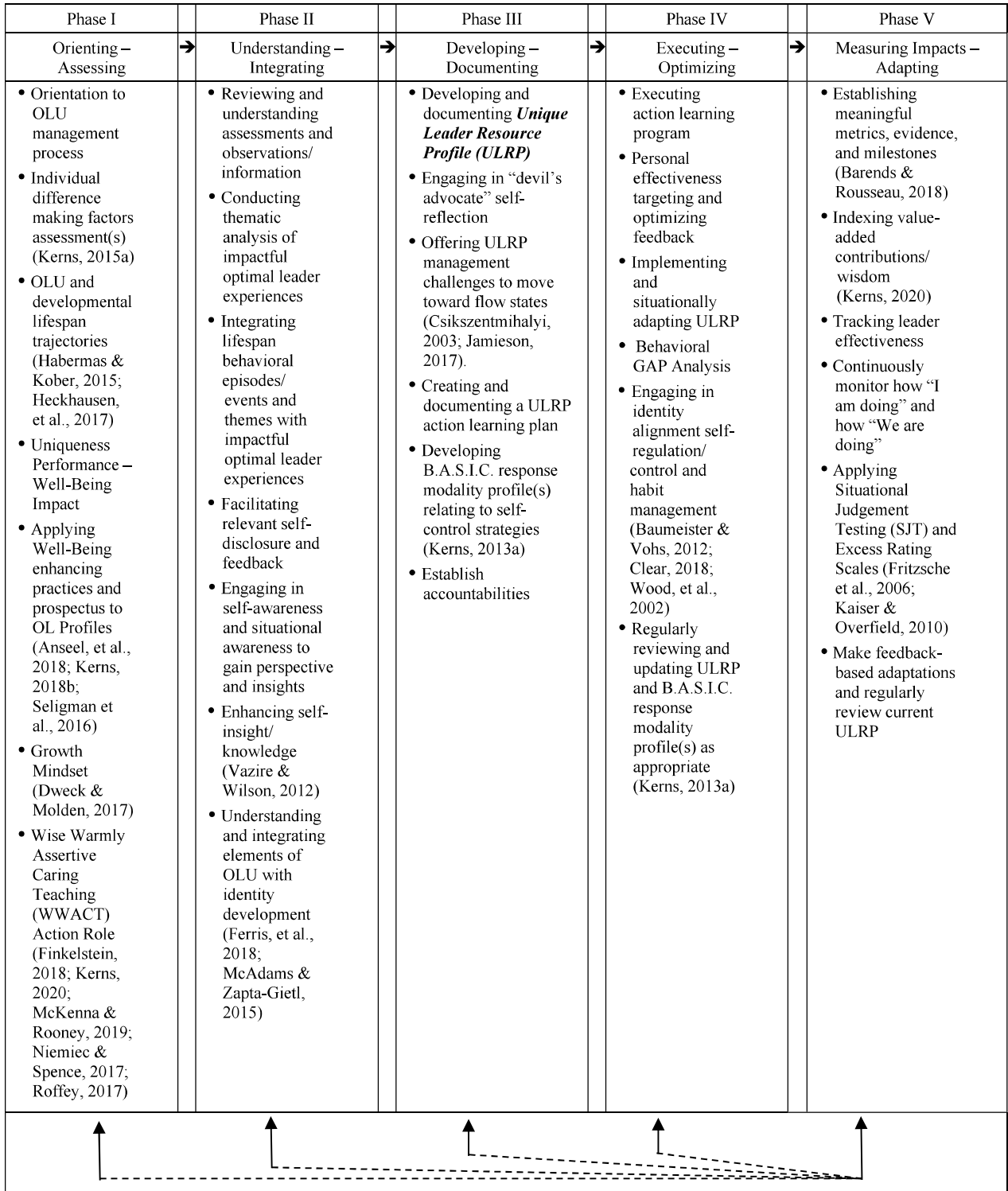
by a review of relevant literature and decades of study and practice.[2] The framework is intended to help managerial leaders more effectively address their unique set of relevant personal resources in ways that help them optimize their value-added contributions and impacts for stakeholders. This work also helps contribute to the rather sparse amount of extant literature relating to practice-oriented evidence-based approaches to managing leader behavior for optimal impact across different situational contexts (Barends & Rousseau, 2018).

OPTIMIZING LEADER UNIQUENESS CYCLE

As discussed in this article, optimizing leader uniqueness seeks to help leaders assess, understand and integrate their unique pool of relevant resources to create a profile. In this process leaders are guided in executing and optimizing their unique leader profile while measuring and adapting their actions to optimize their leadership impact. The Optimizing Leader Cycle depicted below in Figure 1 helps "operationalize" this process of helping leaders optimize their impacts across diverse situational contexts.

In the framework, the five phases are presented in chronological order of the optimizing leader uniqueness cycle; however, the components are inter-related and in practice are dynamic and interactive. The discussion which follows Figure 1 describes the components and the interplay among them.

FIGURE 1
OPTIMIZING LEADER UNIQUENESS (OLU) CYCLE©

Phase I		Phase II		Phase III		Phase IV		Phase V
Orienting – Assessing	→	Understanding – Integrating	→	Developing – Documenting	→	Executing – Optimizing	→	Measuring Impacts – Adapting
• Orientation to OLU management process • Individual difference making factors assessment(s) (Kerns, 2015a) • OLU and developmental lifespan trajectories (Habermas & Kober, 2015; Heckhausen, et al., 2017) • Uniqueness Performance – Well-Being Impact • Applying Well-Being enhancing practices and prospectus to OL Profiles (Anseel, et al., 2018; Kerns, 2018b; Seligman et al., 2016) • Growth Mindset (Dweck & Molden, 2017) • Wise Warmly Assertive Caring Teaching (WWACT) Action Role (Finkelstein, 2018; Kerns, 2020; McKenna & Rooney, 2019; Niemiec & Spence, 2017; Roffey, 2017)		• Reviewing and understanding assessments and observations/ information • Conducting thematic analysis of impactful optimal leader experiences • Integrating lifespan behavioral episodes/ events and themes with impactful optimal leader experiences • Facilitating relevant self-disclosure and feedback • Engaging in self-awareness and situational awareness to gain perspective and insights • Enhancing self-insight/ knowledge (Vazire & Wilson, 2012) • Understanding and integrating elements of OLU with identity development (Ferris, et al., 2018; McAdams & Zapta-Gietl, 2015)		• Developing and documenting *Unique Leader Resource Profile (ULRP)* • Engaging in "devil's advocate" self-reflection • Offering ULRP management challenges to move toward flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Jamieson, 2017). • Creating and documenting a ULRP action learning plan • Developing B.A.S.I.C. response modality profile(s) relating to self-control strategies (Kerns, 2013a) • Establish accountabilities		• Executing action learning program • Personal effectiveness targeting and optimizing feedback • Implementing and situationally adapting ULRP • Behavioral GAP Analysis • Engaging in identity alignment self-regulation/ control and habit management (Baumeister & Vohs, 2012; Clear, 2018; Wood, et al., 2002) • Regularly reviewing and updating ULRP and B.A.S.I.C. response modality profile(s) as appropriate (Kerns, 2013a)		• Establishing meaningful metrics, evidence, and milestones (Barends & Rousseau, 2018) • Indexing value-added contributions/ wisdom (Kerns, 2020) • Tracking leader effectiveness • Continuously monitor how "I am doing" and how "We are doing" • Applying Situational Judgement Testing (SJT) and Excess Rating Scales (Fritzsche et al., 2006; Kaiser & Overfield, 2010) • Make feedback-based adaptations and regularly review current ULRP

Phase I: Orienting – Assessing

It is important during Phase I that leaders are oriented to some key concepts relating to optimizing leader uniqueness. First, leaders need to recognize the role that individual differences play in helping them optimize their uniqueness as a leader. Second, the importance of appreciating how the achievement of optimal performance is a developmental task which is drawn from experience, learning and knowledge acquired over one's lifespan needs to be addressed. The developmental process is advanced through the acquisition of domain knowledge, self-knowledge and sensitivity to contextual cues. Third, the concept of OLU is related to well-being enhancing practices, prospectus and other areas in the field of positive psychology. This positive-oriented developmental process helps leaders assess and leverage their personal pool of individual resources to make value added contributions which positively impact the achievement of desired outcomes for stakeholders. A key outcome of Phase I is that leaders recognize the importance of uniqueness, performance, well-being and impact as dynamic elements in the OLU management process.

During this phase the leader considers selective assessments to complete which help the leader better inventory relevant individual differences. Potential individual difference making factors such as experience, personality, core values and strengths as well as learning preferences and well-being are typically considered. Also, it is important for the leader to be oriented to the concept of growth mindset versus fixed approaches to learning. Further, the idea of prospectus or creatively formulating positive future trajectories is helpful to the OLU process (Seligman, et al, 2016). Leaders are also encouraged to consider the action role of wise warmly assertive caring teaching (WWACT) as part of their repertoire when striving to optimize their uniqueness as leaders (Finkelstein, 2018; Kerns, 2020). This action role is aligned with the strong evidence supporting the value of leaders promoting positive supportive relationships to help optimize motivation at work (Niemiec & Spence, 2017; Roffey, 2017).

Phase II: Understanding – Integrating

Once the leader is oriented to the basic concepts and processes underlying OLU, it is important that these areas as well as relevant assessments be understood and integrated. Reviewing these concepts and assessments through a holistic lens helps a leader gain a better understanding of who they are in relationship to formulating their ULRP. This often entails conducting a thematic analysis of the information that is gleaned during phase I to identify relevant impactful experiences that leaders have had across their lifespans. It is important to integrate these relevant developmental experiences and events into a coherent picture. By doing this, a leader can more knowledgeably and effectively make relevant self-disclosures while being more receptive to feedback from others. In turn, this helps to enhance insights and self-knowledge while further advancing the integration of relevant elements of a leader's identity with their ULRP. It is also important during this phase that leaders recognize the critical relationship between self-awareness and situational awareness and how these two processes are integral to leaders being able to optimize their uniqueness across diverse situations that they regularly encounter. When leaders bring self and situational awareness to situations they can more effectively manage and execute their ULRP in these situations. The ULRP is documented and developed in Phase III.

Phase III: Developing – Documenting

With a better understanding of the foundational underpinnings of OLU and the associated assessments, the development and documentation of a ULRP can be more fully considered and completed. This phase builds upon Phases I and II which provides context for the development of the ULRP. Once this profile is documented, trusted others are encouraged to engage in playing devil's advocate with the leader and to help the leader further review and perhaps consider refining the leader's ULRP.

After the ULRP is finalized, an action learning plan is developed to help guide the execution and optimizing of the profile. Accompanying the action plan, as needed and appropriate, are the development of B.A.S.I.C. response modality profile(s) relating to leader self-control strategies and provisions for establishing accountabilities.[3] Leaders are also offered developmental challenges to help them stretch in striving to optimally execute their ULRP (Jamieson, 2017). These challenges include facilitating them to engage in activities which encourage the leader to achieve flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Phase IV: Executing-Optimizing

After developing and documenting the ULRP, a variety of useful things can be done to help in executing and optimizing the action learning plans formulated during Phase III. For example, the ULRP can be connected to a leader's identity and further linked with the process of habit management (Clear, 2018). During this phase leaders become more aware that their daily habits ultimately reflect their identity as a leader. Also, provisions for ensuring accountabilities which were established during Phase III are considered. In turn, gap analysis is used to help index behavioral areas where the leader needs to improve to advance in optimizing the ULRP. Regularly reviewing and updating the ULRP as well as the B.A.S.I.C. modality response profile(s), as needed and appropriate, is instrumental in helping leaders move closer to optimizing their ULRP across differing situational contexts.

Phase V: Measuring Impacts – Adapting

Establishing meaningful metrics and milestones is a key element in this phase of the optimizing leader uniqueness cycle. Indexing value-added contributions especially stemming from the execution of the WWACT action is a challenging yet important part of this phase. During this phase, a leader's effectiveness is continuously tracked. This includes having leaders frequently monitor how "I am doing" and how "We are doing". Making ongoing adaptations and regular adjustments to the leader's ULRP based on feedback is an integral part of Phase V. Situational judgement testing has been useful in helping leaders measure their effectiveness in adapting their actions associated with their ULRP to challenging situations they encounter (Fritzsche et al., 2006).

THE VALUE OF DEVELOPING AND MANAGING LEADER UNIQUENESS

The process of developing and managing a leader's uniqueness offers a number of benefits. This approach recognizes and underscores that there is no complete leader for all situations. It creates the opportunity for a more positive focus on a leader's unique set of individual difference making factors. These factors when understood and integrated into a ULRP help provide a more positive approach to the leader's development. This approach is also supportive of the growing evidence of the efficacy of positive leadership (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014; Wooten & Cameron, 2013).

Integral to the development of optimal leaders is the notion that a leader needs to know themself. This observation is a frequent reframe among many involved in developing leaders (Ashkenas & Manville, 2019; Drucker, 1999). The current approach is especially valuable because it considers both self and situational awareness. It recognizes the real-world reality that development and management practice can and do occur simultaneously for emerging as well as seasoned leaders. Closely related to this benefit is the dynamic tension that exists between the desire for short-term efficiency/cost saving and the longer-term investment in helping leaders optimize their ULRP to drive meaningful metrics and value-added contributions.

Developing and managing ULRP's over one's working career and perhaps lifetime helps position leader development as an ongoing developmental process and not an event (Day & Liu, 2019). The current approach also helps bring into focus the importance of time as a critical variable in the development of leaders' optimal performance and well-being across diverse situational contexts. This approach particularly helps to underscore the importance of time perspective in understanding and managing unique leader resource profiles. Effectively developing and managing the leader's uniqueness requires an understanding and appreciation of the need for a balanced time perspective. With a balanced time perspective, leaders come to recognize the importance of learning from the *past*, focusing on what is most important and what they can influence in the *present* while innovatively looking into the *future* (Boniwell, 2009; Kerns, 2012).

The development and management of leader uniqueness also stimulate and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. This practice area provides an opportunity for different sciences and related professionals to come together around the important topic of optimizing leader uniqueness for greater impact across diverse situational circumstances. Further, practitioners can link with applied researchers interested in helping advance the practice and study of optimizing leader uniqueness in different contexts. These collaborative efforts provide the opportunity to bring together important and varied perspectives such as neuroscience,

learning science, behavioral science as well as other disciplines. The current approach also provides an opportunity for these diverse disciplines to examine the best delivery modes to help leaders optimize their uniqueness. These efforts can be advantageous, for example, in studying how external coaching, internal coaching and/or self-coaching impact leaders' efficacy in leveraging and optimizing their unique leader resource profiles across different organization settings. They can also be instrumental in examining how self-control strategies and brain science can continue to come together to help in suggesting effective ways to strengthen habits that promote optimal leader behaviors while illuminating approaches that weaken counterproductive habitual response patterns (Clear, 2018; O'Mara, 2018).

Beyond these observations, developing and managing leaders to optimize their uniqueness for greater impact helps counter the epidemic of bad leadership that is increasingly being reported in both academic publications and in the popular press (Aasland et al., 2010; Gurdjian et al., 2014; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). It seems that helping leaders apply their ULRP in discerning ways while practicing the WWACT action role would help in turning around the incidence of bad leadership.

The current approach helps to focus more on developing and managing the bright or positive sides of leadership. This focus offers some balance to the work surrounding ineffective, incompetent and abusive behavior that is reported in studies investigating the dark sides of leadership (Kaiser et al., 2015; Krasikova et al., 2013). Additionally, the current work also brings attention to ways to help shape and influence the formation of positive leader identities at work.

A SEVEN STEP APPROACH

To provide additional practical utility to the concept of optimizing leader uniqueness the following seven step approach provides a specific adaptation of the optimizing leader uniqueness cycle shown in Figure 1. This approach is designed to help leaders strive to optimize their impact on the many varying and often challenging situations they encounter. In the context of trusted advisory service/executive coaching, this approach offers a useful way to help leaders focus on becoming the best that they can be in any given situation. As presented here, optimizing leader uniqueness offers a systematic approach to help managerial leaders develop and manage their unique profiles of relevant resources to optimize the value-added outcomes realized by stakeholders.

Step 1: Positioning OLU Development and Management
The first step in the seven-step process is intended to serve as the "motivating preamble" to initiating an Optimizing Leader Uniqueness (OLU) program. The trusted advisor/coach should review some of the benefits of this approach and review some of the challenges relating to becoming a leader who performs at optimal levels across varying situations. It is important that the trusted advisor endeavors to gain commitment for using the approach from the leader being coached.

Step 2: Orienting – Assessing
As context for introducing some of the potential assessments that may be used, the coach orients the client to some of the key concepts that underlie the OLU management process. These areas typically include conversations about individual differences, unique individual difference making factors, and assessments. Also, the importance of well-being is reviewed along with topics such as learning preferences, growth mindsets and the differences between optimization and efficiency. The importance of having the client consider displaying the WWACT action role as part of the process is also presented.

There are a diverse array of potential assessment tools to use in helping a client consider which areas are most relevant to optimizing performance in the client's leadership role. With the use of selected assessment tools, the executive coach will facilitate the client in identifying areas to explore that will likely contribute to help better understand who the client is when performing at optimal levels. The coach typically assesses a client's strengths, core values, well-being and relevant high impact life-span leadership experiences. Other tools relating to personality facets, learning styles and work style preferences can be considered. It is important that the client understands that any assessment tool is only being used as a

springboard for further conversation regarding how to best utilize the information gleaned to help optimize performance as a leader. Finally, structured interviewing has proven to be very valuable, especially when helping a client better understand and integrate the client's experience with key elements in the client's unique leader identity.

Step 3: Understanding – Integrating

In consultation with the client the coach reviews and helps the leader more fully understand the relevance, application value and impact of the information that was gleaned during the assessment process. In advance of these consultations, it is important for the coach to review this information to look for themes and events across the client's lifespan that connect to the client performing at optimal levels. This review process presents a valuable opportunity for the client to get an integrated understanding of some key elements/forces that contribute to the client's current OLU identity which may be further subsequently used in developing an ULRP.

Step 4: Formulating and Documenting ULRP

The executive coach next asks the client to develop and document a ULRP. This document consists of a statement that addresses the following three questions/content areas which represent the core elements in the ULRP:

1. What do I do?
2. Why do I do it?
3. How do I do it?

The first question addresses what the client does that provides meaningfulness to them but does not, however, reference functional skill sets. The second question taps into the client's motivation for doing what the client does and includes referencing reasons that transcend the client's self-interests. The third question reveals the functional skills/competencies and strengths that the client displays when engaging in this meaningful other directed/transcend work.

The ULRP statement is re-worked and edited until it is reflective of the client's personal resource pool available to optimize performance. The statement should align with the key elements that were identified, reviewed and integrated during steps two and three.

Step 5: Developing Action Learning Plans

Once the ULRP is finalized, the coach and selected others play devil's advocate to help ensure that the profile represents an authentic picture of the client when executing at optimal levels. The ULRP action learning plans are then developed. These plans typically include establishing accountabilities, offering challenges that selectively engage the client's unique resources and developing B.A.S.I.C. response modality profile(s) that help the client stay on course with efforts to optimize the client's ULRP.

Step 6: Executing – Optimizing

With the action learning plans as a guide, the coach and client work closely together to execute the plan and ensure that progress is being made. Personal effectiveness action target areas are reviewed for ongoing feedback and review. This process involves the coach and client developing a gap analysis approach to identify specific opportunities for the client to make progress toward optimizing the ULRP. Special attention is given to linking the client's leadership identity to specific behavioral habits that help optimize the ULRP. Conversely, when bad habits are detracting from making progress, they need to be addressed. These instances represent an opportunity for the coach to model the WWACT action role. Throughout this step a commitment is made to regularly reviewing and updating the ULRP.

Step 7: Evaluating Impacts – Adapting

Setting and tracking meaningful metrics and milestones are integral to the approach and a key component in this step. As part of being accountable for outcomes, the client works with the coach to mutually agree upon a set of meaningful metrics and milestones that can be tracked. Provisions are made

to index appropriate and useful value-added contributions that are made as a result of implementing the ULRP. The client is regularly asked and assessed on progress in executing behaviors that move the client closer to fully optimizing the ULRP. The client is also regularly asked about the impact the client is having on others especially the client's direct reports. Part of this measurement process may include obtaining feedback from others who regularly interact with the client. It is important that the client makes necessary changes and adapts based upon feedback that is received throughout the program.

APPLYING THE SEVEN STEP APPROACH – AN EXAMPLE

To illustrate and assist in putting the optimizing leader uniqueness cycle into use, the following example is offered.[4] Mitch is the president of a division in a large global business enterprise. He has six reports and he reports to the CEO for international business operations. In the context of executive coaching, what follows is the adaptation/customization of the seven-step approach to applying the optimizing leader uniqueness cycle to Mitch's situation in his role as a division president. This program was part of a more extensive organizational culture assessment and change management program.

Step 1: Positioning OLU Development and Management
The trusted advisor/executive coach oriented Mitch to the seven-step approach and highlighted a number of benefits that this approach offered him. Benefits and challenges that were reviewed included:
- Mitch would be able to identify and assess relevant individual difference making factors that contribute to his uniqueness as a leader.
- Mitch would be offered a systematic approach to develop and manage his ULRP.
- Mitch was made aware that this approach would challenge him to find new and stretching ways to utilize his unique personal resource pool to make meaningful differences at work.
- It was stressed that this approach requires a great deal of focused attention on who he is as a leader and would likely entail challenging him to confront and perhaps change some habitual behavior patterns in order for him to fully optimize his performance and well-being.
- This is an evidence-based approach which highlights the value of developing and managing one's ULRP.
- With coaching, Mitch could learn to apply this approach with his six key reports.
- This approach would help directly drive his key result of increasing the number of people displaying high-performance with high well-being in his division, starting with himself.
- As part of the developmental process he would be able to practice a new action role i.e. the WWACT leader action role.

After reviewing each of the program steps, Mitch was probed for his level of commitment for completing this program. His commitment level was exceptionally high and he was especially interested in learning more about the WWACT action role and how he could apply it with his people. He was also challenged by having to find new and stretching ways to utilize his unique individual difference making factors and shared that he likely had not been fully utilizing some of his strengths in his current role.

Step 2: Orienting – Assessing
As context for introducing some of the potential assessments that Mitch would be asked to engage in with the executive coach, some key concepts that underlie the OLU process were reviewed. Topics covered included the WWACT action role as well as the role that individual difference making factors play in helping to develop his ULRP.
Mitch was then asked to complete several assessment tools that provided information on the following six individual differences making factors:
- Experience
- Core values
- Personality facets

- Strengths
- Work style preferences
- Well-Being

These six individual difference making factors were the focus of his optimizing leader uniqueness program.

Step 3: Understanding – Integrating

In consultation with his executive coach, Mitch identified the following areas, based on his assessments, that seemed to be most relevant in developing his ULRP:

- He prefers to assertively take charge, organize and implement/execute. He is an extroverted "thruster-organizer" who sets up systems to get results.
- He is courageous, kind and honest.
- His life experiences have strengthened his passion for teamwork and developing others.
- He believes that work needs to be experienced as meaningful in order to optimize one's career well-being
- He enjoys communicating and offering perspective to others.

Based on the understandings and integrative perspective gleaned during this step, Mitch was prepared to develop and document his ULRP.

Step 4: Formulating and Documenting ULRP

Mitch was asked to respond to the following three questions:

Q1: What do I do?
Q2: Why do I do it?
Q3: How do I do it?

Based on his responses the following ULRP statement was drafted and finalized based on several conversations with his executive coach and selective others in his network:

> "I help individuals and teams organize to achieve meaningful results by communicating with me and each other in constructive and honest ways. I do this because I value learning and contributing to the development of others. Beyond my own accomplishments, I measure my effectiveness by how many people and teams have been challenged to grow, learn and develop under my leadership. I accomplish 'What I do' by effectively using my people skills combined with my excellent analytic abilities, expertise and experience in systems engineering and strategic thinking/planning."

The above statement aligned with the key elements that were identified, reviewed and integrated doing steps two and three in the process.

Step 5: Developing Action Learning Plans

After Mitch finalized his ULRP statement he engaged in a game of devil's advocate with his coach and two of his key reports. This involved having these individuals provide constructive feedback on things that were missing or that were not necessarily the most important elements to his uniqueness from their perspective. As a result of this devil's advocates' feedback, Mitch fine-tuned his ULRP statement. Three of the most noteworthy and impactful points of feedback offered by his devil's advocates were as follows:

1. Explicitly list strategic succession planning design, development and execution as a "How do I do it" area. This was considered a clear and important way that he achieves meaningful results.
2. Add enhancing others' career well-being as a "What do I do" area. The devil's advocates saw Mitch as a person who promotes the advancement of others both inside and outside his company. He is someone in their collective view who "authentically" cares about the development of others.

3. While communicating with honesty is a strength, Mitch was advised to not "overuse" it. It was suggested that he be more discerning when communicating "honestly" with others (i.e. sometimes it's best to defer the conversation to a more appropriate time and/or situational context).

Subsequently, action learning plans were created and developed collaboratively by Mitch and his executive coach. They were also shared with his key reports who provided feedback before he finalize them. The following are some key action learning areas that were contained in his plan:

1. Read the book, <u>Fear Your Strengths: What You Are Best at Could Be Your Biggest Problem</u>, by Robert Kaplan and Robert Kaiser.
2. Find new and different ways to apply your passion for teamwork and team building skills with different stakeholder groups.
3. Practice executing the Wise Warmly Assertive Caring Teaching (WWACT) action role in executive committee meetings. Do this more proactively and make it a productive habit and link the WWACT action role to your OLU identity.
4. Start explicitly communicating the meaningfulness that positions/jobs contribute to the organization beyond their functional purpose. Practice making "meaningful job" statements throughout the organization by connecting what people functionally do with the value-added outcomes for the end users they serve (Cardador, 2019; Kerns, 2013b).
5. Develop non-traditional metrics and ways to measure wisdom and value-added contributions. Work to include diverse stakeholders in this process.

Step 6: Executing – Optimizing

Mitch and his executive coach worked closely to ensure that he executed and optimized his action learning plan. This process included developing key target areas for special emphasis. Part of the execution and optimizing process involved tracking behaviors that were not aligned with his ULRP. One unproductive habit was identified, surfaced and was addressed and resolved. This area focused on Mitch's need to optimize his uniqueness by being more discerning regarding "when" and "where" to honestly communicate with individuals and teams. With feedback, he worked to more intentionally read people and situations to determine "when" and "where" to offer his honest perspective. In addition, Mitch was regularly challenged to find ways to optimize his team building skills with, for example, key strategic customers and to measure his effectiveness in terms of enhancing customer loyalty. Two meaningful metrics that he valued were customer satisfaction and loyalty.

It was during these exchanges challenging Mitch to confront his unproductive habits and other areas of opportunity that his coach was able to model the WWACT leader action role. These situations created teaching moments wherein his coach helped him identify and practice key elements of the WWACT action role. Mitch regularly role-played with his coach and subsequently practiced the action role in real time with his people.

Throughout this step Mitch and his coach regularly communicated and followed up on the key elements in his action learning plans and related actions. Mitch remained especially open to receiving feedback and making adjustments to his behavior regarding how it aligned with his identity and his ULRP.

Step 7: Evaluating Impacts – Adapting

Mitch and his executive coach agreed on the following meaningful metrics and milestones in order to help him stay on track as he implemented his action learning plans to advance his ULRP:

Meaningful metrics: Well-being; wisdom; value-added contributions index; new product revenues; stakeholder value; customer loyalty, behavioral impact index.

Milestones: Read Fear Your Strengths book; rate and reach well-being targets across selected domains; coach two reports through OLU management process; complete and implement formal succession plan.

Throughout this step Mitch was routinely ask how he was doing in advancing his efforts to achieve his ULRP. He also worked with his executive coach to index the impacts that he was making especially as they related to making value-added of contributions to others. One particular contribution that he was especially proud of related to the development and implementation of an organizational effectiveness survey to measure the impacts of several strategic action plans on key stakeholders. These results were considered and incorporated into a broader strategic planning process. He remained flexible and adapted his action plan based on the feedback he received throughout the program. An example of a feedback-based adaptation that he made was holding team building sessions with several key stakeholder groups to strengthen these relationships by defining common purpose, goals, and interdependence. These efforts included working with key strategic customers to enhance loyalty and collaboration around product design.

Situational judgement testing using customized challenging scenarios were also employed to help Mitch assess his effectiveness in adapting his responses/actions related to applying his ULRP in targeted situations which represented challenges to him. Situations involving his need to recognize his "hot buttons" and practice self-control strategies were among some of the target areas that he and his coach reviewed using situational judgment testing methods (Fritzsche et al., 2006). These challenging situations were presented to Mitch by his coach and Mitch offered what he considered to be optimal responses. He and his coach discussed each of his responses to help Mitch make proactive adjustments to the way he responds to challenging situations. Subsequently, he would use "take aways" from these situational judgement testing sessions as he executed his ULRP in his leadership role.

SOME CHALLENGING ISSUES

Putting the optimizing leader cycle into practice presents some challenging issues. There is a need for those involved in helping managerial leaders optimize their performance and well-being to recognize that leader development and real time practice are intertwined. Helping leaders become their optimal best while executing leadership responsibilities is a developmental process that requires practice and learning. Those interested in developing leaders should work to find action learning assignments that challenge emerging and seasoned leaders to use their ULRP in new and stretching ways. These efforts should move beyond remediation to help leaders build upon their unique profile of relevant resources to proactively optimize value-added contributions and impacts for stakeholders. To accomplish this, practitioners and leadership developers will need to be skilled in understanding key frameworks and tools relating to positive approaches to leadership assessment and development (Jarden & Jarden, 2017; MacKie, 2017). Further, researchers are challenged to study how optimizing the performance of leaders in the present may predict future success in various situational contexts (Bouland-van Dam et al., 2020; De Meuse et al., 2010; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

Practitioners who are facilitating the implementation of the optimizing leader cycle are also challenged to embrace growth mindsets. This includes considering and learning to integrate the WWACT leader action role into their work. In these efforts their self-views and skill sets may need to be reviewed to ensure that they align with the wise warmly assertive caring teaching leader action role perspective. In my work in this area, I have increasingly found that practitioners, in particular, find this action role valuable in their work and find ways to integrate it into their behavioral repertoires as they execute their leadership roles. It seems both challenging and important for leadership developers to consider integrating this perspective and action role into their work in helping leaders to learn, grow and develop (Kerns, 2020; Niemiec & Spence, 2017; Roffey, 2017).

Another challenge is to ensure that self-awareness in the context of assessing and developing one's ULRP is operationally defined in ways that have practical utility for practitioners. For example, in the current approach, a leader's uniqueness is focused on specific individual difference making factors and related behavioral correlates which may be further translated into more observable practices to be managed and/or developed as needed and appropriate. It is important to challenge practitioners and applied researchers to integrate situational awareness or context into their formulations of frameworks designed to help leaders optimize their ULRP. Self- awareness and situational-awareness go hand-in-hand in helping leaders decide when and where to act competently (Kerns, 2015b; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2020).

There is a need to develop more innovative, integrative and holistic approaches to developing and assessing leader uniqueness profiles. These efforts need to consider such areas as developmental factors, individual differences and perhaps other relevant and impactful elements that may contribute to leaders optimizing their unique profiles of relevant resources. Closely associated with this challenge is the need to establish additional metrics to assess value-added contributions and non-traditional outcomes such as wisdom. It would also be especially helpful to have additional ways to index and assess the impacts of executing the WWACT leader action role on optimizing leader performance and well-being (Kerns, 2020).

Given the paucity of evidence-based frameworks for practitioners to review and consider, it would be wise to challenge practice oriented applied researchers to explore additional approaches to help leaders define, assess and execute their unique optimal leader profiles (Barends & Rousseau, 2018). This work would be particularly helpful if it integrates practices into a practical systematic process that recognizes human development and offers a multi-discipline perspective. The emerging field of neuroscience and the related study of brain-based leadership is fertile ground for interdisciplinary collaboration (O'Mara, 2018).

Beyond the current framework and approach, applied researchers and/or evidence-based oriented practitioners are challenged to develop these additional programs to help emerging and seasoned leaders better understand, develop and manage their efforts to optimize their leadership impact across their lifespan. In developing frameworks and tools to help leaders optimize performance, such as the one offered in this article, I along with my colleagues utilize the following set of criteria. The framework and tools need to:

- add value to an organization
- have face validity for practitioners
- be relevant, applicable and impactful to practitioner's daily work
- be evidence-based in practice and/or research
- be practical to implement in an organizational operating environment
- be coachable/teachable

Applied researchers are also encouraged to develop criteria that are relevant, applicable and impactful in helping leaders develop and manage their ULRP when executing their roles as leaders. These efforts will help advance this important practice area.

Finally, practitioners and their organizations are challenged to entertain a broader array of stakeholder groups that go beyond the traditional singular focus on shareholders when considering and measuring impacts. Guthey et al. (2019) remind us of the opportunity for leadership researchers and leadership development practitioners to make meaningful value-added contributions to major society and global challenges. However, as these authors point out, this opportunity has not been fully embraced. It seems, however, that by engaging collaboratively with diverse stakeholder groups these major societal and global challenges could be more profitably addressed. Leaders and those engaged in the practice of leadership development are challenged to think beyond shareholder value and expand their strategic perspective to include a broader array of stakeholder groups. This perspective combined with the appropriate mix of collaborative efforts may further the chances for leaders to apply their unique and relevant resources to make important, value-added and meaningful contributions to the world. This challenge also relates to the current criticism of what management scholars are focusing on in their work and writing (Tourish, 2020). Taken together, it seems that if practitioners entertain a broader array of stakeholders in their work and academics are encouraged to engage with them around major global and societal challenges that leaders could benefit through enhancing their opportunities to optimize their unique leader profiles in new and important ways that positively impact the world and the practice of business leadership.

Attending to these challenges will likely enhance our understanding and knowledge of the optimizing leader uniqueness concept as an important area in helping leaders make meaningful and value-added contributions to the stakeholders they serve. As more focused attention is given to this practice area additional challenges for practitioners, applied researchers and teachers will be offered. All of these efforts will help in moving this important topic forward to the benefit of leaders and those they serve.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Managerial leaders and those interested in helping leaders optimize their performance and well-being can benefit by having practical approaches that leverage a leader's individual difference making factors. Building upon and leveraging leaders' uniqueness helps them drive their unique leader resource profiles to make value added contributions to those they serve. As this work moves forward, there will be a need for useful assessment tools, non-traditional metrics that measure value added contributions which consider a broad array of stakeholders and additional practice-oriented approaches to help leaders effectively develop and manage themselves to become optimal leaders across varying contexts. Having leaders make value-added contributions as a result of developing and managing their uniqueness optimally will likely pay substantial dividends for stakeholders. Their individual efforts and those of others who help them optimize their unique profile of relevant resources are laudable and make good business sense.

ENDNOTES

1. Over three decades a debate comparing and contrasting management and leadership has taken place. In this article the terms leader, manager, managerial leader, management, and leadership are used synonymously.
2. My system of managerial leadership strives to provide practitioners, applied researchers and teachers with an integrated approach to viewing and understanding leadership. The system brings together several streams of leadership study and research that have been offered over the past 100 years. Concurrently, the development and implementation of frameworks and tools for optimizing a leader's uniqueness which is the focus of the current article can help advance the practice, study and teaching of leadership. It is, however, beyond the scope of the current presentation to review and discuss the other system dimensions and related practices.
3. B.A.S.I.C. response modalities can be developed and used to help leaders make adaptations to their ULRP. Five separate but interactive response modalities relate to human personality. I use an analysis of the five response modalities, identified using the acronym B.A.S.I.C., to help trusted advisory clients to identify and proactively develop responses to challenging situations and especially as these situations relate to addressing their "hot buttons". The components in the basic response modalities are: B = Behavior which relates to observable actions; A = Affect or psychological emotions; S = Sensations or physical feelings within one's body; I = Image or mental imagery/pictures; C = Cognition or thoughts/covert self-talk. In any situation an individual will react using any or all of these modalities. I have adapted this framework based on the work of Arnold Lazarus. For those interested in exploring this framework further please see the following: Kerns, C.D. (2013). Self-control at work, Managing "hot buttons", *Graziadio Business Review*, 16(3); Lazarus, A.A. (1997). *Brief but comprehensive psychotherapy: The multimodal way*. New York: Springer Publishing; Palmer, S. (2012). Multimodal coaching and its application to workplace, life and health coaching, *Danish Journal of Coaching Psychology*, 2, 91-98.
4. This example is drawn from my work as an executive coach/trusted advisor with a key executive. For confidentiality purposes, identifying information has been changed.

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