

Leadership Traits of Superintendents in a Rural, Midwest State: Perceptions of School Board Presidents and Superintendents

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Abstract

Perhaps no relationship is as crucial for practicing superintendents as the relationship with their school board presidents. This study examined which leadership traits of superintendents were most important according to superintendents and school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest. A researcher-developed survey studied how important each of eight traits were to the two groups on a Likert scale, as well as how both groups ranked the eight traits. Both groups found trustworthiness and communication competence to be most important, and intelligence to be the least important of the eight traits in this study. The traits in the middle varied in importance depending upon which group was ranking them and on the size of the school districts.

Key Words

leadership traits, superintendents, school board presidents, rural schools, board relations, trait theory, trustworthiness, communication competence

Introduction

Whether leaders are made or born is a question that has been debated for more than a century (Hoffman et al., 2011; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 2016; Zaccaro et al., 2018). The most famous leaders in history are known for the traits that define them, and great leaders appear to have greatness within them. Kirkpatrick and Locke state that “regardless of whether leaders are born or made or some combination of both, it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people” (p. 59).

While leaders stand apart from followers in the political and business worlds, the same can be said for leaders in education. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) found that successful superintendents were unique among educators, and that rural superintendents were unique among their peers working in dissimilar contexts (p. 12). In education leadership, different types of leaders are found in different situational contexts (Bredeson et al., 2011; Copeland, 2013; Forner et al., 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Superintendents answer to a variety of stakeholders, arguably none with more significance than the school board. A strong relationship between the superintendent and the school board president is essential (Petersen & Short, 2002; Richard & Kruse, 2008; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2015). While the relationship itself is important, a sub context is the individual differences that make up who the superintendent is and the parity between the perceptions of board presidents and superintendents regarding which leadership traits are important.

The need for this study is in identifying which traits make up rural superintendents in

the Midwest, and which traits are most important for superintendents to possess. The nuances of context also matter in the respect that expectations can vary between different types of schools, small, large, rural or urban. This study can inform superintendent practice and aid superintendents in being mindful of information that is essential to finding the right fit in seeking employment, as well as which strengths to focus on for greater success.

Review of Selected Literature

The literature review is broken up into two sections: leadership trait framework and context of rural superintendency.

1. Leadership Trait Framework

Trait theory provides a theoretical framework for this study. While no leadership model is perfect, the trait approach to leadership is the approach that focuses most heavily on the makeup of the leader.

Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn and Lyons (2011) point to an evolution in the trait approach, “recent conceptual models have expanded their treatment beyond traditional, trait-like individual differences to include proximal, malleable individual differences ... lending credence to the hypothesis that to some extent, leaders are born, not made” (p. 365).

The application of trait approach in this study focuses on who the leader is and how his or her own differences impact leadership. As Northouse (2016) points out, the trait approach to leadership is the only approach that focuses solely on the makeup of the leader (p. 30).

Trait theory dominated the study of leadership prior to the mid-twentieth century. While dozens of leadership theories have been studied since that time, each one has its

strengths and its shortcomings. Stogdill (1948) suggested that people who are leaders in one situation may not be leaders in another situation (p. 70). Zaccaro (2007) explains how Stogdill's (1948) work and later that of Mann (1959) led researchers to eschew trait-based leadership approaches, only to have researchers like Kenny and Zaccaro (1983) and Lord, De Vader, and Alliger (1986) come back to trait theory.

Recognizing that leaders are unique is essential to understanding how leadership works, but it seems that context also matters. Zaccaro (2007) points out that "the situation is critical in explaining variance in leadership behavior; however, it may not be as critical in explaining differences between leaders and nonleaders" (p. 8). Situations and context matter, yet modern trait theory recognizes that there is something special about effective leaders, that they are somehow different from others.

The renewed interest that the trait approach has seen since the 1980s recognizes what makes leaders special, while also considering the complexity of leadership. Zaccaro (2007) explains that some leadership qualities are heritable and do not change much over the life of the leader, while others are more state-like and evolve through maturation and experience (p. 9). While certain traits make leaders unique, it seems leadership can be developed, and the trait-approach is compatible with recognizing the importance of situational context.

Two of Stogdill's (1948) summations were particularly telling on how situation impacts leadership.

The first is that knowledge is particularly important in identifying leaders in a given situation, that a leader's emergence in

that context is dependent on his or her specific knowledge in that situation (p. 47).

The second is that leaders emerge when their competencies match the goals and activities of the group (p. 66).

People follow leaders who are competent in their field. Professional competence is an example of a trait that is related to a more foundational trait, like intelligence. A leader's professional competence, in contrast to a trait like intelligence, can change over time as task knowledge increases.

Zaccaro, Green, Dubrow, and Kolze (2018) differentiated between foundational leadership traits and more malleable and specific leadership competencies. They go on to explain that the foundational traits, which are more universal across situations, predispose a person to leadership potential, and that specific leadership capacities suit leaders for leadership in more specific situations (p. 7). Professional competence is such a trait.

Leaders emerge in large part because followers are drawn to leaders who possess the right foundational traits for leadership, but within specific contexts leaders must distinguish themselves within their given field with their professional competence.

Professional competence impacts how and why people follow leaders for a couple of reasons. One of the reasons that leaders with high levels of professional competence draw followers is because of the relationship between professional competence and another trait, trustworthiness. Trusting a leader is more than believing that a leader has the will to do what is right, it is also believing that the leader has the ability to do what needs to be done

(Hoffman, et al., 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Kramer 2011). Trust is also about competence. Followers must believe that their leaders are capable within their field, that they will have not only the will, but also the competence necessary for the job.

Context of rural superintendent leadership

Zaccaro et al. (2018) explain how leadership traits can be classified into two types, foundational traits, which are primarily heritable traits and are causal precursors to the second type, leadership capacities, which are associated with leadership outcomes and are individual differences that are more mutable and can be developed (pp. 6-7). Zaccaro et al. (2018) leadership capacities align with Hoffman et al. (2011) distal individual differences. Both authors separate the traits that support leader emergence and leader success across situations from those that vary by situation. That distinction, first uncovered by Stogdill (1948) and Mann (1959) and later explained by the likes of Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991), Lord et al. (1986), and Zaccaro et al. (2000), lends itself to an argument to view leadership trait research through the lens of context.

In order to accurately address what it is that makes leaders unique and what it is that makes leaders effective in varying situations, the context of leadership must be part of the conversation. A significant part of what makes a leader in a given situation is what makes that leader emerge as a leader in a broader sense as well; both parts are integral pieces to the leadership puzzle.

Taking what is known about leadership context from Hoffman et al. (2011), Kirkpatrick and Lock (1991) and Zaccaro et al. (2018) and applying it to superintendent leadership, it can be assumed that some leadership traits will be somewhat universal to

superintendents across situations, and some individual differences would be more prominent among school leaders in a particular context. Rural education is different from education in urban and suburban settings, and rural education leadership presents its own unique leadership context (Bredeson et al., 2011; Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

The literature indicates that there are layers of context that impact leadership in different situations. For example, Lamkin (2006) found that many of the challenges faced by rural superintendents in her study were not completely unique to the rural superintendency, but rather five challenging areas were universal to “the role of the superintendent in general and to challenges based on the changing field of education rather than to challenges based solely on the rural environment of the work of rural superintendents” (p. 19).

Methodology

The methodology section is divided into two sections: population and sample, and research design.

Population and sample

The sample included 88 respondents from 144 school districts, 27 school board presidents and 61 superintendents. There were 150 school districts in the state, and the survey was sent to every public school district minus the district for which the researcher is the superintendent and the five school districts represented in the pilot study. For the purpose of this study, schools in this state were divided into three groups, small enrollment (K-12 enrollment below 500), medium enrollment (K-12 enrollment between 500 and 999), and large enrollment (K-12 enrollment of 1000 or more). The three separate groups were established by the researcher and the pilot study group. Surveys were sent to school board presidents

and superintendents of public school districts in the state. The researcher utilized the entire sample of 88 respondents for the Likert scale ratings of the 24 leadership trait dimensions. Some respondents did not rank the traits one through eight for the last question on the survey, so those responses were removed from the study of the ranked traits. For the second part of research questions one and two, as well as the MANOVA conducted for research question three, the sample included 54 superintendents and 22 school board presidents, or a total sample of 76.

Research design

The survey was a cross-sectional survey in which the researcher collected data during a two-month window of time in one school year. The data were analyzed quantitatively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The researcher was able to determine how each leadership trait was rated by superintendents compared to school board presidents and differences between each group.

Data analysis

Research question one was: Which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to superintendents in a rural state in the Midwest? This question was answered using descriptive statistics. Twenty-four of the thirty-one questions on the survey were questions that asked the respondents to state their agreement on the importance of three different dimensions of each leadership trait using a Likert scale. Means were used to analyze the importance of each multi-dimensional leadership trait individually.

Taking a different approach, the final question on the survey asked respondents to rank each of the leadership traits in order of importance, with one being the most important and eight being the least important among the eight traits. Mean, median, mode, and

percentages were used to analyze the importance of each trait in relation to the others and to compile a rank order of importance among the eight traits.

Research question two was: Which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest? This question was answered in the same way as research question number one.

Research question three was: To what extent do position and school enrollment influence differences in perceptions of superintendent leadership traits in a rural state in the Midwest? The researcher conducted a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to analyze research question three. It answered whether school district size impacts the perceptions of school board presidents versus superintendents. The two-way MANOVA also provided analysis on the main effect of each independent variable, allowing a look at how school district size impacts perceptions, regardless of position, as well as how position impacts perceptions, regardless of school district size.

Findings

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the importance of each of the eight leadership traits according to superintendents. Each trait was analyzed in depth by three questions that were designed to investigate a different dimension of the trait, presented on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important.

Trustworthiness and communication competence emerged as being rated most consistently towards extremely important, as evidenced by the fact that all three of the dimensions of each trait were clustered towards the top of the list. *Trustworthiness, perceived*

as a person of integrity had the highest mean among all of the trait dimensions ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .444$), tied with *confidence, being calm when confronted with problems* ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .444$). *Trustworthiness, perceived as a person of high moral character* was the next highest trait dimension ($M = 4.70$, $SD = .495$), and *trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* displayed the sixth highest

mean out of the 24 dimensions ($M = 4.67$, $SD = .507$). Intelligence was clearly the lowest trait, with two dimensions in the bottom four and all three dimensions falling within the lower nine.

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations of leadership trait dimensions as rated by superintendents.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations (Superintendent Responses)

Trait Question	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Confidence Calm	4	5	4.74	.444	.197
Trustworthiness Integrity	4	5	4.74	.444	.197
Trustworthiness Character	3	5	4.70	.495	.245
Initiative Work Ethic	4	5	4.69	.467	.218
Communication Proficient Skills	3	5	4.69	.534	.285
Trustworthiness Believable	3	5	4.67	.507	.257
Communication Knowledge, Awareness	2	5	4.67	.569	.324
Initiative Drive	4	5	4.64	.484	.234
Communication Appropriate for Context	3	5	4.59	.528	.279
Leadership Motivation Desire to Influence	3	5	4.57	.590	.349
Professional Competence Capable	3	5	4.57	.562	.315
Leadership Motivation Responsibility	3	5	4.57	.562	.315
Professional Competence Knowledge	3	5	4.52	.536	.287
Initiative Determination	3	5	4.51	.536	.287
Confidence Belief in Own Abilities	3	5	4.51	.622	.387
Intelligence Reasoning	3	5	4.48	.536	.287
Problem Solving Able to Identify Problems	3	5	4.43	.562	.315
Confidence Self-assured, Decisions	3	5	4.43	.559	.313
Problem Solving Existing Resources	3	5	4.41	.559	.313
Professional Competence School Finance	3	5	4.30	.558	.311
Intelligence Perceptive	3	5	4.15	.543	.295
Leadership Motivation Prefer Leader Role	1	5	4.15	.910	.828
Problem Solving Creative	3	5	4.13	.695	.483
Intelligence IQ	1	5	3.05	1.056	1.114

The final question on the survey asked respondents to rank the eight leadership traits one through eight, with one being the most important and eight being the least important. Whether taking the aggregate of the dimensions of the traits or analyzing the traits as a whole through ranking, trustworthiness ($M = 2.95$, SD

$= 2.352$) and communication competence ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 2.093$) were still the top traits according to superintendents, and intelligence was the least important trait ranked ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 2.100$). Table 2 displays the mean, median, and mode of the trait rankings according to superintendents.

Table 2

Mean, Median, Mode of Trait Rankins (Superintendent Responses)

Trait	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	Standard Deviation
Trustworthiness	2.95	2.00	1	1	8	2.352
Communication Competence	3.31	3.00	2	1	8	2.093
Professional Competence	3.89	4.00	3	1	8	2.157
Problem Solving Ability	4.02	4.00	3	1	8	1.665
Leadership Motivation	4.51	4.00	4	1	8	2.243
Confidence	4.87	5.00	6	1	8	2.125
Initiative	5.95	5.00	5	1	8	1.938
Intelligence	6.13	7.00	8	1	8	2.100

Table 3 displays the percentage of respondents who ranked each trait first or

second, in the upper half of traits, in the lower half of traits, or seventh or eighth.

Table 3

Trait Ranking Percentages (Superintendent Responses)

Trait	1st	1 st or 2 nd	Upper Half	Lower Half	7 th or 8 th	Last
Trustworthiness	38.2%	60.0%	76.4%	23.6%	12.7%	9.1%
Communication Competence	20.0%	47.3%	74.5%	25.5%	14.6%	5.5%
Professional Competence	16.4%	30.9%	63.6%	36.4%	14.6%	5.5%
Leadership Motivation	9.1%	25.5%	56.4%	53.6%	27.3%	10.9%
Confidence	7.3%	27.3%	41.8%	58.2%	25.5%	16.4%
Problem Solving Ability	3.7%	20.4%	61.1%	38.9%	7.4%	1.9%
Initiative	3.6%	18.2%	32.7%	67.3%	23.7%	7.3%
Intelligence	3.6%	9.1%	21.8%	78.2%	58.1%	34.5%

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the importance of each of the eight leadership traits according to school board presidents. Each trait was analyzed using three questions designed to flesh out a different dimension of the trait, presented on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. Trustworthiness was the trait most represented towards the top of the list for trait dimensions, as it was with the superintendent responses;

however, communication competence was a close second. *Confidence, being calm when confronted with problems* was the top-rated trait dimension ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .444$). *Trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* was the top dimension of trustworthiness among school board presidents and the third dimension overall among the 24 ($M = 4.78$, $SD = .424$). Table 4 displays means and standard deviations of leadership trait dimensions as rated by school board presidents.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations (Board President Responses)

Trait Question	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Confidence Calm	4	5	4.85	.362	.131
Communication Knowledge and Awareness	4	5	4.81	.396	.157
Trustworthiness Believable	4	5	4.78	.424	.197
Initiative Work Ethic	3	5	4.78	.506	.256
Communication Proficient Skills	4	5	4.78	.424	.179
Trustworthiness Character	4	5	4.74	.447	.199
Leadership Motivation Responsibility	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Initiative Drive	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Trustworthiness Integrity	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Leadership Motivation Desire to Influence	4	5	4.63	.492	.242
Professional Competence Perceived as Capable	4	5	4.59	.501	.251
Confidence Belief in Own Abilities	3	5	4.56	.577	.333
Communication Appropriate for Context	4	5	4.56	.506	.256
Problem Solving Utilizing Existing Resources	3	5	4.52	.580	.336
Confidence Self-assured Regarding Decisions	3	5	4.52	.580	.336
Professional Competence Knowledge	3	5	4.48	.643	.413
Initiative Determination	3	5	4.48	.580	.336
Intelligence Reasoning	3	5	4.44	.577	.333
Professional Competence School Finance	3	5	4.37	.792	.627
Leadership Motivation Prefer Leadership Role	1	5	4.30	.869	.755
Intelligence Perceptive	3	5	4.30	.869	.755
Problem Solving Creative	3	5	4.26	.594	.353
Problem Solving Able to Identify Problems	3	5	4.15	.602	.362
Intelligence IQ	1	5	3.15	1.134	1.285

The final question on the survey asked respondents to rank the eight leadership traits one through eight. Trustworthiness ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 2.594$) and communication competence ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 2.405$) were the top two ranked traits according to school board

presidents, which is similar to the results indicated by the mean ratings of the aggregate trait dimensions on a Likert scale. Table 5 displays the mean, median, and mode of the trait rankings according to school board presidents.

Table 5

Mean, Median, Mode of Trait Rankins (Board President Responses)

Trait	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	Standard Deviation
Trustworthiness	3.41	2.50	1	1	8	2.594
Communication Competence	3.65	3.00	1	1	8	2.405
Professional Competence	3.96	3.00	2	1	8	2.421
Leadership Motivation	4.13	4.00	2	1	8	2.160
Problem Solving Ability	4.74	5.00	5	2	8	1.685
Initiative	5.09	6.00	6	2	8	2.091
Confidence	5.65	6.00	6	2	8	1.695
Intelligence	5.91	7.00	8	1	8	2.334

The ranking of traits by school board presidents produced similar results to the analysis of the aggregate ratings of the trait dimensions, but some differences did emerge. Trustworthiness and communication competence were again the top two traits among school board presidents. Trustworthiness was ranked first at 36.4%, while 50.0% ranked the trait as first or second. 72.7% ranked trustworthiness in the upper half. Communication competence was ranked first by 26.1% of respondents, second by 43.5%,

and 60.9% of school board presidents ranked the trait in the upper half. Only 13% of school board presidents ranked professional competence as the most important trait, but 33.5% of respondents ranked it as the second highest trait. Professional competence was ranked either one or two (43.5%) and in the upper half (60.9%) by identical percentages as communication competence. Table 6 displays the percentage of respondents who ranked each trait first or second, in the upper half of traits, in the lower half of traits, or seventh or eighth.

Table 6

Trait Ranking Percentages (Board President Responses)

Trait	1st	1 st or 2 nd	Upper Half	Lower Half	7 th or 8 th	Last
Trustworthiness	36.4%	50.0%	72.7%	27.3%	22.7%	9.1%
Communication	26.1%	43.5%	60.9%	39.1%	17.3%	4.3%
Competence						
Professional	13.0%	43.5%	60.9%	39.1%	21.7%	8.7%
Competence						
Leadership	8.7%	21.7%	65.2%	34.8%	17.3%	13.0%
Motivation						
Intelligence	8.7%	13.0%	21.7%	78.3%	56.5%	34.8%
Initiative	0%	18.2%	36.4%	63.6%	22.7%	9.1%
Problem Solving	0%	13.0%	43.5%	56.5%	17.3%	4.3%
Ability						
Confidence	0%	4.3%	26.1%	73.9%	34.7%	13.0%

Research question three asked to what extent do position and school enrollment influence differences in perceptions of superintendent leadership traits in a rural state in the Midwest. A MANOVA was conducted to analyze the interactive effect of the independent variables, namely whether perceptions were impacted by enrollment, and whether superintendent and school board president's perceptions differed. The independent variables were role (superintendent or school board president) and enrollment (small, medium, and large). The dependent variables were the rankings of each of the eight leadership traits.

Looking at each of the predictors individually, role did not show a statistically significant main effect in the MANOVA, $F(8, 63) = 0.938, p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .894$, partial $\eta^2 = .106$. Although not statistically significant, the main effect for role explained 10.6% of the variance, superintendents $N = 54$, school board presidents $N = 22$. The main effect for

enrollment did not show statistically significant results, $F(16, 126) = 0.992, p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .789$, partial $\eta^2 = .112$. Although not statistically significant, the main effect for enrollment explained 11.2% of the variance, small $N = 37$, medium $N = 22$, large $N = 14$. The MANOVA did not show a statistically significant interaction between role and enrollment, but the model did account for 13.1% of variance, $F(16, 126) = 1.190, p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.755$, partial $\eta^2 = .131$. Without a statistically significant result, no further post hoc tests were conducted.

Conclusions

The data from this study led to the following conclusions:

1. Both superintendents and school board presidents in this rural, Midwestern state identified trustworthiness and communication competence as the most important leadership traits for superintendents to possess.

2. Both superintendents and school board presidents identified intelligence as the least important leadership trait among the eight traits studied.
3. When taking a multidimensional view of the eight leadership traits a nuanced vision of superintendent as leader begins to emerge, based on the interaction and interdependence of the leadership traits with one another.

Discussion

The big takeaway from this study is that these data begin to paint a picture of superintendents in a rural Midwestern state.

This study does not provide evidence on what the most effective superintendents are doing. Nor is it prescriptive, telling superintendents which leadership behaviors will endear them to their boards and provide long term job security.

What it does do, however, is provide two perspectives regarding which leadership traits are important in this rural, Midwestern state. It begins to inform the profession by painting the picture of what school board presidents value in a superintendent. It also paints the same picture from the perspective of other superintendents who are on the job every day, working within this context of a rural state in the Midwest.

For both superintendents and school board presidents, confidence was ranked low in order of importance among leadership traits. However, one dimension of this trait, *confidence, is calm when confronted with problems*, was the top-rated trait dimension among both superintendents and school board presidents. This disparity speaks to the interaction of the traits in the makeup of the whole leader. When taken within the totality of

leadership trait dimensions that make up a leader, it helps to paint a picture of the ideal leader. Calm and collected in a crisis, trustworthy, competent in communication, this person can be believed and can deliver a message that people will follow. This is the man or woman that people want leading them.

Trustworthiness emerged as the most important trait to both superintendents and to school board presidents. When analyzing the individual dimensions of the trait, the data told a more nuanced story.

For superintendents, *trustworthiness, perceived as a person of integrity* was tied for the dimension rated most consistently as highly important, while *trustworthiness, perceived as a person of high moral character* was a close second.

For school board presidents, *trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* was the most important dimension of trustworthiness. How school board presidents rated the importance of these trait dimensions may be telling in how they value the trait of communication competence, especially when viewed in light of how they ranked these traits as compared to superintendents.

A school board president's perception of a superintendent's trustworthiness may be dependent on the superintendent's communication competence. School board presidents ranked trustworthiness slightly higher than communication competence. Superintendents ranked trustworthiness higher than communication competence, whereas school board presidents seemed to value the two traits more closely to each other at the top of the list. It appears that school board presidents place more value on communication competence than do superintendents.

The ranking of intelligence as a leadership trait presents a paradox in this study when compared to past research, as it was the trait ranked the lowest among both superintendents and school board presidents.

The aggregate of leadership trait dimensions also pointed to intelligence being the least important trait in this study. Intelligence is typically one of the most consistently correlated traits to leadership emergence and success (Antonakis, 2011; Hoffman et al., 2011; Kickul and Neuman, 2000; Stogdill, 1948; Zaccaro, 2007). But there may be a logical explanation.

First, all of these eight traits, including intelligence, were deemed important by the superintendents participating in the pilot study. The dimensions of *intelligence, has a high reasoning ability* and *intelligence, is highly perceptive* had mean ratings of 4.48 and 4.15 respectively, both falling between quite important and extremely important on the Likert scale. Judge, Colbert, and Ilies (2004) sum up why intelligence is so closely linked to leadership in stating that, “leaders are responsible for such tasks as developing strategies, solving problems, motivating employees, and monitoring the environment,” all intellectual functions (p. 543). Intelligence is important to superintendents and school board presidents; it is just not the most important trait.

Superintendents and school board presidents both expressed that trustworthiness and communication competence were the most important traits for superintendents to possess. In this rural Midwestern state it is less about what a superintendent knows, and more about whether people know they can trust the superintendent. Bass (1981), Zaccaro (2007), Zaccaro et al. (2018) point to a curvilinear relationship between intelligence and

leadership, where individual subjects on either the very low or very high end of the intelligence spectrum struggle to find success in leadership tasks or in management positions. Northouse (2016) sums up this relationship in saying that if a leader’s IQ differs too much from followers, the result can be counterproductive, as the leader struggles to connect with followers and to communicate ideas that are too advanced (p. 24).

There are a number of traits that a successful leader must have in his or her tool kit to be successful. Although intelligence consistently shows some of the greatest effect sizes across the body of research, it seems that there comes a point where the disparity between leader and follower intelligence brings diminishing returns. That point appears to be somewhere around the point when it negatively impacts other traits that a leader needs to be successful, like communication or even trustworthiness because the followers just cannot relate to this person.

The leadership traits ranked towards the top get noticed, as do those on the bottom, but the traits in the middle also have a story to tell. The difference in how school board presidents and superintendents ranked leadership traits like problem solving ability and professional competence is not surprising when one considers the difference in roles between a superintendent and a school board president.

Superintendents ranked problem-solving ability higher than did school board presidents. Superintendents solve problems on a daily basis, a role that their peers would recognize as being highly important. School board presidents do not get involved in the day-to-day activities in a school, but rather, they meet once or twice per month. Often times when a problem is brought to the board, it has been hashed through and is brought forward

with a recommendation by the superintendent. Conversely, school board presidents ranked professional competence higher than did superintendents, likely because superintendents are closer to the job and take for granted the level of expertise required to run a school district on a daily basis.

School board presidents typically have fulltime jobs outside of education, so their areas of competence are likely outside of education. School board presidents rely on superintendents to be their experts in the field. School board presidents value superintendents who know what they are doing.

Recommendations for Practice

While it is interesting to see which leadership traits are valued most by school board presidents and superintendents, one has to ask why it matters.

It matters because how people lead is driven by who they are. While a person does not change who he or she is, a person can strive to be his or her best self. That could also mean being his or her best self for a given situation. Human behavior and relationships are complex, and according to Zacarro et al. (2018) leadership is a complex mix of heritable foundational traits and more mutable leadership capacities that drive leaders' behavior in different situations.

Leaders may choose which tools to pull from their leadership toolboxes in a given context, or even in specific situations, regardless of whether those tools are traits that they were born with or capacities they have developed through years of experience. Neither a superintendent's possession of a given trait, nor the importance of that trait in a given situation is binary. Each leader possesses a number of different leadership traits to

varying degrees, and the combination of those traits, and how they align with the school board president's awareness of them, can predispose a leader to success in varying situations:

1. Superintendents have an opportunity to be more self-aware and use that knowledge to inform their practice. Each leader possesses a certain combination of leadership traits, and superintendents can utilize that knowledge, coupled with their own self-awareness, to focus and prioritize their leadership efforts more appropriately.
2. Knowing that school board presidents value the same leadership traits in superintendents differently than superintendents do, superintendents can utilize that nuance to shift their approach to leadership in ways that will strengthen relationships with their school boards.
3. School board presidents can be more aware of the traits that superintendents value and then better understand what makes their own superintendents tick, meaning that school board presidents would be better equipped to work on improving the school board president superintendent relationship.

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to superintendents and school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest. This study also sought to link leadership of public school superintendents to the study of leadership in other areas, recognizing that while the context of school leadership in a rural state in the Midwest is unique in many ways, it is still leadership.

The results showed that some leadership traits are deemed important by both superintendents and school board presidents, but those results led to several other questions that should be investigated:

1. Although there was some variance in the level of importance among the eight traits studied, and the order of importance varied somewhat depending on the role and other demographics of the respondents, all eight traits were rated as important. Another study could be conducted on a larger number of traits to determine which traits are important among a broader range of leadership traits and perhaps if any other leadership traits exist that are perceived as equally important or even more important than the eight that were studied here.
2. This study was conducted in one rural state in the Midwest. A similar study could be conducted in other states to see if the results could be applied more broadly.
3. It is one thing to study which leadership traits are perceived to be important for superintendents to possess, but that study begs the question, which traits among these would be correlated with successful leadership in a given context. A study could be conducted in which the results of some measure of success are compared to the degree to which superintendents possess each of these eight traits. Which combination of these traits is correlated with given measures of success for public school superintendents?

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