**Leadership Style Training and Employee Engagement:**

**A Qualitative Case Study of**

**Transit Employees Perception on the**

**Influence of Servant Leadership Style Training**


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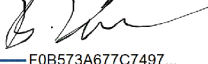VERONICA D. O'NEAL

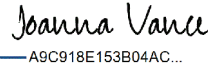
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# Abstract

Fast Stop Transit, a Texas public transportation agency, underwent an organizational change that involved the implementation of servant leadership training across the transit agency in hopes of improving employee engagement due to the agency's Executive Leadership Board receipt of many customer complaints regarding the service the agency was providing. The problem that was addressed in this study was the role leadership behavior played on the decline of employee engagement due to the lack of managers' leadership training and skills and the impact on customer service outcomes (Chao, 2020). The influence of leadership is significant to employee performance more so during organizational change. The purpose of this study was to explore how transit managers' servant leadership training influenced employee engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2015). Engaged employees pass on their enthusiasm to customers so much so that employees develop and deliver better products and services (Kumar et al., 2015). According to Northouse (2016), antecedent conditions are context and culture in terms of organizational culture and power; leadership attributes in terms of traits leaders used to interact morally and emotionally with their employees; and follower receptivity of how employees receive servant leadership in terms of the impact on their engagement. Leadership training is more effective than previously thought, leading to improvements in perceptions of utility and satisfaction, learning, transfer to the job, organizational outcomes, and subordinate outcomes (Lacerenza et al., 2017). The study's research on managerial influence of the skills implemented because of leadership style training contributed to the transit agency's reduction in customer complaints and improvement in customer satisfaction.

*Keywords:* transit agency, employee engagement, servant leadership training

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The executive leadership board at Fast Stop Transit, a well-established public transportation agency located in Texas, USA, received an overwhelming number of complaints from both customers and employees regarding the level of service the agency was providing. Therefore, the board hired an independent consulting firm to investigate and provide recommendations to resolve the complaints. In conclusion of the investigation, the firm revealed that an extreme decrease in employee morale impacted employee engagement which inadvertently affected the agency's customer service and performance. The firm attributed the decrease in morale to the lack of leadership skills managers possessed across the agency. Employees complained that the biggest problem with their managers was poor communication, under appreciation, favoritism, and employees being overworked. Employees were in consensus that they avoided giving input for fear of retribution. With various organizational changes, employees expressed that they oftentimes felt overworked and under-appreciated with special attention given to managers' favorite employees. Hence, the firm recommended that all managers alike participated in servant leadership training and implement the skills and techniques taught and learned throughout the training to improve employee morale which will improve the agency's customer satisfaction and performance.

Through a qualitative exploratory case study approach, the intent of this study was to explore how transit managers' servant leadership training skills influenced transit employee engagement at Fast Stop Transit. Employee engagement affects commitment, productivity, and the agency's bottom line. To explore the influence of employee engagement throughout Fast Stop Transit, the servant leadership training was linked to the employees' end-of-year performance evaluation which was directly tied to specific agency goals and objectives.

There is an abundance of literature showing how leadership style influences employees, but research regarding leadership style training on transit employee engagement data is needed to help identify and prioritize problem areas related to employee motivation, job commitment, and productivity. Leadership has existed for as long as people have interacted, and it is present in all cultures no matter what their economic or social makeup is. Leadership is not only a human quality; founded in primitive forms in various animal species, from low-level vertebrates such as chickens to higher-level primates such as gorillas and whales (Trottier, Wart, & Wang, 2008). Leadership theories such as Bernard M. Bass's (1985) full range leadership model, which includes transactional and transformational leadership approaches, are an essential part of the leadership research (Trottier et al., 2008).

Although Bass's 1985 model attested to Transformational Leadership, Robert K. Greenleaf's 1970 Servant Leadership philosophy set up the theoretical framework for this study. Greenleaf (1977) noted that the servant leadership philosophy allows for a fresh way of approaching the task of leadership, dispelling the traditional top-down approach to leadership that excluded followers from the decision-making process. Through stewardship and service, servant leaders can shift the paradigm of leadership (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011).

Leaders are essential actors in public performance improvement and organizational change. Yet, a key question has not been addressed in prior literature on the topic: how do leadership processes make a difference? Contemporary leadership theories emphasize the importance of servant leadership for understanding both administrative processes and organizational outcomes (Sun & Henderson, 2017). Schwarz, Newman, Cooper, and Eva (2016) proclaimed that based on social learning theory, we argue that by emphasizing to their followers the importance of serving others both inside and outside the organization and by acting as role

models by serving others themselves, servant leaders enhance job performance by engendering higher public service motivation in their followers. Public service motivation decides how employees in the public-sector deal with their daily job demands and resources (Bakker, 2015). Public-sector occupations span from teachers to firefighters including transit employees. Although leadership literature relating to performance data is readily available for most public-sector occupations, leadership literature about transit performance data is sparse. Chapter 1 concludes with the theoretical framework and research questions in which this study was built as well as assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

According to Singh (2019), there is an abundance of literature showing how leadership style training influences employee motivation, job commitment, and productivity. However, there is a scarcity of literature regarding how transit managers' servant leadership training skills and techniques influence employee engagement. Although the philosophy of servant leadership is a timeless concept, Greenleaf first introduced servant leadership as a theory when he published "The Servant as Leader" essay in 1970. Greenleaf developed his theory of servant leadership while an executive at AT&T, and later lectured at Harvard Business School, Dartmouth College, and the University of Virginia. He founded The Center for Applied Ethics, now known as the Robert K. Greenleaf Center (Greenleaf, 1977).

Servant leadership is becoming more popular in places like universities and nonprofit sectors. Although traditional leadership involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," the servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible (Sipe & Frick, 2015). Servant leadership is researched internationally, and distinct types of favorable individual, team, and organizational outcomes have been linked to the construct. Different servant leadership measures have been

validated to date and a clear distinction has been made between the theory of servant leadership and other leadership theories. Ergo, it seems that research on the implementation of servant leadership within an organization is still in need (Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017).

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem that was addressed in this study was the role leadership behavior played on the decline of employee engagement due to the lack of managers' leadership training and skills and the impact on customer service outcomes. The role of leadership in an organization can impact employee engagement which will affect the overall outcome of customer satisfaction (Chao, 2020). Effective leaders have a clear vision of the company's future and can communicate this vision to their employees. The adoption of an appropriate leadership style can result in higher levels of employee motivation, job commitment and productivity, which can be viewed as performance variables (Babalola, 2016).

The adoption of servant leadership training within Fast Stop Transit may result in higher levels of employee motivation, job commitment, and productivity and might also subsume as performance data in the National Transit Database. Although there is significant research proving the organizational benefits of servant leadership, Spears, and Lawrence (2016) proclaimed the major attributes of effective leadership today are integrity, trustworthiness, and authenticity. Both management and business researchers have studied the role of leadership style in successful organizational change as outlined in Kurt Lewin's (1951) three-step change model only to discover that today's organizations change regularly. Effective leaders understand the difference and can communicate the change to their followers (Petrou, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2018). At the same time new organizational ideas are the products of transformation, describing those ideas come in the form of implementing servant leadership styles through practical training throughout Fast Stop

Transit. Although most funds in corporate training budgets distribute to leadership style training, only a small minority of organizations believe their leadership style training programs are highly effective (Schwartz, Bersin & Pelster, 2014).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how transit managers' servant leadership training skills influenced employee engagement as it related to improved communication and appreciation, eliminating favoritism, and reducing employee workloads. A qualitative exploratory case study was right for this study as this method relied heavily upon transparency, practices, and adherence to evidence. Qualitative research involved studying the meaning of peoples' lives, as experienced under real-world conditions. Qualitative research differs because of its priority devoted to representing the views and perspectives of a study's participants (Yin, 2015). The method used for an exploratory case study was a qualitative method. Qualitative methods are used to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of people regarding a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

Ospina (2017) proclaimed that public settings are the perfect contexts in which to explore the complexities of the changing practices of leadership and to use the insights to theorize about new theories such as servant leadership. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how transit agency employees perceived the influence of transit supervisors and managers' servant leadership style training on their employee engagement in Texas. Transit supervisors and managers of Fast Stop Transit completed a 5-week training workshop on servant leadership. The selected participants of this study had a minimum of one-year' experience working in a servant leader environment within Fast Stop Transit. Understanding these biotic experiences were

critical to employee engagement strategies and the leadership philosophies adopted throughout

Fast Stop Transit's training workshop.

**Theoretical Framework**

Carter and Baghurst (2014) expressed that servant leadership is a leadership philosophy

which addresses the concerns of ethics, customer experience, and employee engagement while

creating a unique organizational culture where both leaders and followers unite to reach

organizational goals without positional or authoritative power. Servant leadership style training

and employee engagement are the frameworks in which this study is built upon. Xu and Cooper-

Thomas (2011) declared that organizations aspire to have engaged employees and spend

considerable resources to measure and improve employee engagement. Theoretically,

leadership is a key antecedent of engagement, yet there is no research directly linking leader

behaviors and follower engagement (Xu et al., 2011). Despite widespread adoption of servant

leadership, we are only beginning to understand its true utility across multiple organizational

levels (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney & Weinberger, 2013).

So-called servant leaders strive selflessly and altruistically to assist others before

themselves, work to develop their followers' greatest potential, and seek to benefit the wider

community (Miao, Newman, Schwarz & Xu, 2014). Othman, Mahmud, Noranee, and Noordin

(2018) noted that employees who feel involved in the organization are willing to exert more

effort in performing their job. An engaged employee is emotionally attached to the organization,

passionate about his or her work, and cares about the success of the organization (Othman et al.,

2018).

Employees' perceptions of the influence of training were examined as Fast Stop Transit

underwent an organizational change by implementing transit supervisors and managers' servant

leadership style training across the agency. Managers leadership style was associated with the followers' appraisal of change through their engagement with their supervisors. Based upon the servant leadership framework, the significance of this study was to determine how followers perceived the influence of servant leadership style training on their employee engagement to improve employee motivation, job commitment and productivity. Tischler, Giambatista, McKeage, and McCormick (2016) hypothesized that servant leadership may contribute to an employee's positive self-concept by enhancing overall worker happiness, feelings of empowerment, sense of self-confidence, and the positive sense of self. In turn, servant leadership style training may also result in employee motivation, job commitment and productivity.

**Nature of the Study**

This study used a qualitative exploratory approach to explore the perceptions of employees and understand the construct of servant leadership training skills and techniques implemented by their managers as it related to influence on employee engagement. Qualitative research is driven by a desire to explain social behavior and thinking, through existing or emerging concepts (Yin, 2015). Each employee's thought process was emanated from the way in which the employee perceived interaction with their manager. In turn, the differences in each person's perception affected the way that qualitative research was conducted and reported. Operationally, these will show up even (and especially) when describing what might otherwise appear to be a straightforward or group of participants (Yin, 2015). A qualitative exploratory design is pertinent for the study as this type of research enabled an initiatory evaluation of servant leadership through the biotic experiences of employees in the transit environment.

A qualitative exploratory case study provides the breadth to explore commonalities from participants with firsthand experience working for a servant leader employer (Yin, 2015). A

qualitative approach differentiates the study from others as the design provided a roadmap for participants to outline their experience with servant leadership in their own words, versus answering multiple-choice questions through a quantitative approach (Silverman, 2016). This study examined a small sample of transit employees with a minimum of one year' experience within Fast Stop Transit and obtained their personal perspectives of servant leadership and the corresponding influence on employee engagement.

**Research Questions**

This study attempted to bridge the gap between understanding how transit managers' servant leadership training and employees' perception of the skills and techniques implemented as a result of training relates to their employee engagement - employee motivation, job commitment and productivity by answering the following questions:

**RQ1.** How do transit agency employees perceive the influence of transit managers' servant leadership training on employee motivation?

**RQ2.** How do transit agency employees perceive the influence of transit managers' servant leadership training on job commitment?

**RQ3.** How do transit agency employees perceive the influence of transit managers' servant leadership training on productivity?

The research questions examined how 8 employees perceived the influence of servant leadership training on employee engagement after their manager completed a 5-week training workshop on servant leadership.

**Significance of the Study**

The influence of leadership is significant to employee performance more so during organizational change. Major organizational change coupled with varying leadership

can cause disconnection among employees in the workplace. According to Yasumoto, Euskara, and Birdwell (2001) the importance of strong ties in the workplace, which ease the flow of information provides the collective ability to respond quickly and flexibly when problems of practice occur, and create capacity to ensure consistent performance throughout work groups. Disconnection in the workplace may be the single most preventable detrimental force that leads to underachievement, depression, disloyalty, and job loss (Hallowell, 2011). Because change is hard, all effective leaders are driven by resolute purpose with respect to deep human values. Fullan (2011) suggested to be deliberative about your practice, work on being a resolute leader, galvanize motivation, build collaboration, and know your impact—and realize that new experiences can have lasting effects.

This study may contribute to current and future studies on servant leadership on managerial influence of transit employee engagement during organizational change. In this global competitive environment, effective leadership is necessary to reduce the attrition rate. From the effective leadership only, it is possible to achieve organizational goal productively. Leadership affect employee performance and productivity (Swamy, 2014).

This study may also add to leadership knowledge in the context of transit performance data due to sparse availability of literature regarding leadership within transit agencies. Information gathered provided further insight into the effectiveness of servant leadership and additional data on the influence of leadership style on employee engagement.

Increased knowledge of servant leadership and biotic experience data obtained from this study can help leaders create strategies to change the culture of organizations in which leaders have not practiced a leadership born from transforming service to others. Although this study was limited to a transit agency, the data gathered may contribute to theoretical discussions,

practical applications of servant leadership, and a greater knowledge of engagement drivers, which may benefit other likeminded organizations. The additional information gained from this study may prove beneficial to any organization creating leadership-training programs while establishing an importance of servant leadership to today's workplace.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

      **Employee Engagement.** Employee engagement refers to the emotional involvement, commitment, and dedication the employee has to the organization and its goal and objectives.

      **Employee Performance.** Employee performance refers to Individual knowledge and skills that contribute to organization-wide results (Shields et al., 2015).

      **Followers.** Followers are employees/subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence that do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line (Kellerman, 2008).

      **Leadership.** Leadership is a process whereby influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. [Leadership is] … a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers (Northouse, 2010, p. 3).

      **Organizational Change.** Organizational change is the implementation of organizational practices that impact the organizational culture and potential importance to the organization's success (Anderson, 2016).

      **Organizational Development.** Organizational development is the facilitation of an organization's capacity to
self-reflect, self-regulate and take control of its own processes of improvement and learning (Kaplan, 1996).

**Servant Leadership.** Servant leadership is a term and philosophy which was originated by Robert K. Greenleaf, and which puts serving the greater needs of others as the primary goal of leadership (Spears, 1996).

**Transit Agency.** A transit agency is an organization established as either a chartered corporation or a government agency created to providing public transportation within a specific region.

**Transit Employee.** A transit employee is a current employee within the transit organization referred to in this study as an operator or attendant (Fast Stop Transit, 2018).

**Transit Manager.** A transit manager is a mid-level manager with a direct connection to the operator, attendant, or supervisor (Fast Stop Transit, 2018).

**Transit Supervisor.** A transit supervisor is the supervisor of a transit employee (operator) within the transit organization referred to in this study (Fast Stop Transit, 2018).

**Summary**

Bolman and Deal (2017) noted that year after year, the best and brightest managers man oeuvre or meander their way to the apex of enterprises great and small. Then they do dumb things. We have certainly made a noble effort to improve organizations despite our limited ability to understand (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Diverse people see the terms "leadership" and "management" very differently. Some individuals see these terms as synonyms and frequently use them interchangeably. Chiabrishvili and Chiabrishvili (2013) upheld that when others approached them as extreme opposites; so extreme, in fact, that they would argue that you cannot be a good manager and a good leader at the same time. Still other people reside somewhere in the middle and realize that while there is a difference between leadership and management, with

the right knowledge an individual can successfully navigate both from the same position (Chiabrishvili et al., 2013).

Supplied were a brief background on servant leadership, employee engagement and the significance and nature of this study. A theoretical framework using servant leadership provided the roadmap for exploring the influence of servant leadership style training on employee engagement at Fast Stop Transit. Chapter 1 concludes with a brief overview of the nature of the study, definitions of key words discussed, and assumptions.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review expanding on the theoretical framework of servant leadership and employee engagement by analyzing research found through scholarly reviewed articles and journals, books on the study subject, and other research, which helps to support the purpose and importance of the qualitative case study. The chapter begins with keyword searches, a historical overview, and current findings on servant leadership and employee engagement. Opposing views offer different views on the study topic. Chapter 2 supplies a detailed analysis of literature found about servant leader and employee engagement.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how transit agency employees perceived the influence of transit managers' servant leadership training on their employee engagement in Texas. This qualitative exploratory case study was based on the notion that leadership is imperative to organizational growth (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012) and that varying leadership affect employee engagement (Cooper & Nirenberg, 2004). Cooper et al. (2004) proclaimed that individual perspectives, biases, and expectations as stake holders influence leadership effectiveness. Courageous leaders stand strong in the face of adversity and take necessary risks to achieve results (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012).

One does not have to be a superstar to be effective; instead, one must work on being a clear-headed, persistent learner in the setting in which you work, with an eye to the bigger picture. Because change is hard, all effective leaders drive resolute purpose concerning deep human values. Be deliberative about your practice, work on being a decisive leader, galvanize motivation, build collaboration, and know your impact—and realize that new experiences can have lasting effects (Fullan, 2011). At the loftiest level, moral purpose is about how humans evolve, primarily how they relate to each other (Fullan, 2007). Responding to an initiating change in today's organization is a prerequisite to maintaining or gaining competitive advantage (Allan, 2012).

Bradberry and Greaves (2012) validated that great leadership is indeed a difficult thing to pin down and understand. The appropriate leadership and approach awaken truth applied in situations. Managers' idea of leadership has been deformed by a myth that links leadership to hierarchy, as if leaders were needed only in systems that operate from the top down (Palmer, 2004). Leadership is about character, both mental, moral, and physical. *"Be ye transformed by*

*the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the will of God (Rom. 12.2)"* was intended, when the Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans, to exclaim that Jesus Christ offers us salvation.

An individual's character is the mental and moral qualities distinctive to that individual. Moreover, an individual's conduct is the way the individual behaves. Hence, leaders are dealing in two different contexts, personality, and behavior. Leaders' actions are from the basis of who we are and who we are is dependent upon what we are facing or dealing with at the time, situational. Once we find wholeness within us, whether it is hidden or undetermined, we will then be able to tap into the ability to be a leader.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review expanding on the theoretical framework of servant leadership by analyzing research found on employee engagement through scholarly reviewed articles and journals, books on the study subject, and other research, which helps to support the purpose and importance of the qualitative study. Leadership styles are studied in the context of a multitude of organizations. Nonetheless, a gap does exist in past and present literature on the impact of servant leadership styles as it relates to employee engagement at transit agencies. To date, such literature does not presently exist. This study attempts to bridge the gap between understanding how the influence of transit supervisors and managers' servant leadership training on employee engagement.

Webster and Watson (2002) stated, "A review of prior, relevant literature is an essential feature of any academic project. An effective review creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is need (p.2)."

In this chapter, the literature reviewed included literature on leadership, emphasizing servant leadership. Additionally, assessed was current literature on employee performance with focus on the public transit industry to discover pertinent literature on servant leadership in relation to employee engagement during organizational change. Ergo, major databases used included: Social Science Research Network, Google Scholar, Business Complete, EBSCOhost, ProQuest and Emerald.

The following publications have been sourced for this study: National Transit Database (NTD), Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business, Journal of Organizational Change Management, Public Personnel Management, Industrial and Commercial Training, Public Administration Review, Journal of Nonprofit Management and Leadership, International Journal of Management, International Journal of Knowledge Management, Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Management Development, and International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences.

**Theoretical Framework**

Leadership is vital for organizations to influence individual and group behavior (Yukl, 2010; Lussier, 2001). Leadership can guide them to achieve the organization goal, through sending messages about how to behave and how to conduct their job (Hart, 1995). In addition, leadership plays a main role in generating and maintaining effective organizations (Rok, 2009). As a result, leadership is one of the concepts most widely studied, debated, and sought-after properties of organizational life, because, both leaders and organizations seek to know what makes an effective leader to reach to the ultimate organizational success.

Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) originated the leadership term and philosophy of servant leadership. Servant leadership is the act of serving the greater needs of others as the primary

goal of leadership. Robert Greenleaf suggested in a groundbreaking 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader*, how caring for our many institutions, and each other, can occur through the practice of servant-leadership. In the 1980s and 1990s servant leadership became a major focus and goal in leadership and management writings, and in organizational practice (Spears, 1996).

Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* birthed the idea of the servant as leader. Leadership was bestowed upon a person who was by nature a servant. The very essence of leadership, going out ahead to show the way, derives from more than usual openness to inspiration (Greenleaf, 2002). The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is whether those served grow as persons; whether they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants (Greenleaf, 2003).

The Servant leadership concept is unorthodox in the sense that it is not about heroic leadership, but the development of others for their betterment. A servant leader has emergent authority and uses such authority ethically and morally as a basis to serve others. A servant leader is a giver in social interaction, who defines and measures the success of his or her leadership by the well-being and advancement of those who are led (Nordbye & Irving, 2017). Servant leadership is a style of leadership characterized by principles of other-centeredness and ethical behavior and suggests that truly effective and legitimate leaders place service to others ahead of personal power and control (Robinson, Neubert & Miller, 2017).

Effective leadership, regardless of nomenclature, promotes employee engagement. The day when a supervisor had only to decide that he did not like an employee or the employee's work is long since passed (Osborne, 1974). When contemplating the strategies for improving

organizational performance, the focus needs to be on optimizing individual performance because individual employees serve as the cornerstones of increased organizational performance (Kassahan, 2007). The workforce now days are the crucial organizational success factor: organizations put a lot of thought and effort to discover the degree of employee satisfaction to enhance their productivity and attain overall organizations objectives (Indermun & Bayat, 2013).

Organizations are concerned about the relationship between employees and the level of satisfaction. This is a critical issue in relation to organizational performance and improvement. Understanding job performance for each employee is essential as organizational decisions are based on individual performance (Sonnentag, Volmer, & Spychala, 2008), leading to organizational success. Performance is defined as "behavior that accomplishes results" (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014) or whether an employee is doing well at his job or not (Javed, Balouch, & Hassan, 2014). Employee performance is influenced by many determinants (Alromaihi, Alshomaly & George, 2017).

**Leadership and Followership**

Leadership was once the study of great leaders (Burns, 1978). The idea was if some people were clearly great leaders, others could learn by emulating what they did. Then leadership became more situational when it was recognized that the followers of a leader influenced the way leaders led. Then leadership became a collection of competencies which anyone could develop and apply as the nature of the job dictated. Leadership is thought of as a trait. Leadership places a great deal of emphasis on the leader and on the leader's special gift (Northouse, 2017). According to McCleskey (2014),

One of the earliest studies of leadership, Galton's (1869) Hereditary Genius emphasized a basic concept that informed popular ideas about leadership (Zaccaro, 2002). The idea is