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Centering relationships in collegiate leadership curricula

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Abstract
The relational leadership model and the five practices of exemplary leadership are widely used models that both emphasize a relational approach to leadership and center the collegiate context as a transformative environment for practicing and developing leadership. This article highlights two different applications of these models and provides important considerations for designing relational leadership curricula and programs for college students.

INTRODUCTION

"Leadership has to do with relationships, the role of which cannot be overstated. Leadership is inherently a relational, communal process" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 94). A variety of leadership models can be used to advance relational views and practices in leadership; however, the relational leadership model (RLM) (Komives et al., 1998) and the five practices of exemplary leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) have been particularly effective in helping college students make meaning of their leadership experiences through a relational lens. While the RLM is by design a relational model, the five practices were designed to be leader-centric and behavioral. Regardless of their original design, both can be used to emphasize relational approaches to leadership, drawing our attention to both the people and process dimensions of leadership. In relational approaches, leadership is not exclusive to individuals based on roles, traits, behaviors, or skills. Rather, leadership emerges from the increasingly complex social relationships and interactions with others.

The majority of theories and models used in leadership programs today were developed for managers in business and public sector organizations, raising questions about their relevance for college students (Freeman et al., 1994; Posner, 2004; Rost, 1991). However, scholarship and resources featuring the RLM, and the five practices intentionally center the collegiate context (e.g., leadership positions, organizations, student employment) as a

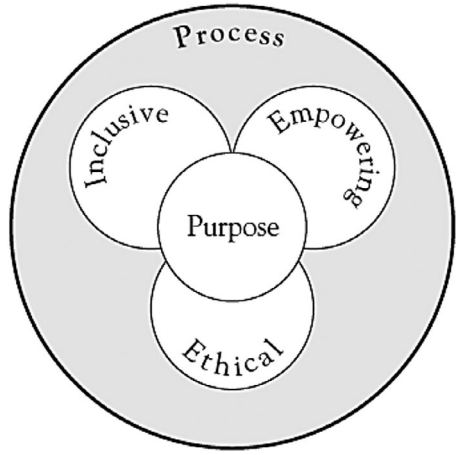

FIGURE 1 The relational leadership model. *Source*: From *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference* (3rd ed., p. 96) by Komives et al. (2013), Jossey-Bass. Reprinted with permission.

transformative environment for practicing and developing leadership. These resources are valuable tools for program design with examples, case studies, activities, and readings that are meant to be directly integrated into collegiate settings. Additionally, the RLM and five practices are simple to understand and communicate, utilize principles that are easy to recall and apply, and create a shared language among groups and teams.

Overview of the relational leadership model

Introduced in *Exploring Leadership for College Students Who Want to Make a Difference* (Komives et al., 1998), the RLM advanced a process-oriented perspective of leadership, countering the dominant person-centered approaches of the time, and serving as a precursor to significant leadership development scholarship in the decades to come. Drawing from psychological and educational approaches, the RLM is grounded in learning, self-awareness, and the belief that our increasingly complex and rapidly changing world will require people understanding, interacting, and ultimately leading together.

The authors defined leadership as "…a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 95). Rather than reducing leadership to a particular set of steps or behaviors, this model provided philosophies and ways of thinking that were more adaptable and meaningful. Komives and colleagues (2013) used the concepts of *knowing, being*, and *doing* (Center for Army Leadership, 2004) to describe a holistic developmental process that can enhance one's work with others toward change. *Knowing* involves an awareness of values, beliefs, and abilities as well as how and why they may differ from others. *Being* involves embracing ethicality, inclusivity, and authenticity. *Doing* involves acting in congruent, community-oriented, and socially responsible ways. Opportunities for the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills are highlighted throughout the model's core elements.

The RLM connects five key elements that can be nurtured, developed, and adopted by groups as members engage in the leadership process together. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of these elements and the relationship between them.

The center of the model is *purpose*. Purpose defines where and how the inclusive, empowering, and ethical leadership efforts from a group are directed. Rather than a vision

being handed down from a positional leader, a common purpose emerges from the collective, leading to greater commitment and collaboration. The RLM specifically identifies working toward positive change as a common purpose in relational leadership.

Relational leadership is *inclusive*, meaning "…understanding, valuing, and actively engaging diversity in views, approaches, styles, and aspects of individuality" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 108). The effective pursuit of a group's purpose requires a willingness to involve external stakeholders, navigate differences by building on individuals' unique strengths and perspectives, and, at times, changing an organization's culture or structure to more effectively include others.

Relational leadership is *empowering* at both individual and environmental levels. Individually, empowerment is claiming one's legitimacy, responsibility, and contributions to the group as well as encouraging others' to claim the same. Environmentally, an empowering organizational culture is characterized by trust and actively working to minimize barriers for involvement.

Relational leadership is *ethical* or driven by a set of values and standards. The model considers leadership to be good and moral in nature, requiring those engaging in it to be committed to doing the right thing.

Surrounding these elements is the *process* of relational leadership. Process refers to "how the group goes about being a group, remaining a group, and accomplishing a group's purposes" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 132). Making decisions and tackling tasks with intentionality creates the interaction and synergy needed to advance the group's purpose.

Overview of the five practices of exemplary leadership

Over 40 years of research, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner have asked the fundamental question, "What did you do when you were at your personal best as a leader?" (2023, p. xii). Through interviews and case studies, Kouzes and Posner (2023) found that challenge is the crucible for leadership and the opportunity for greatness, revealing a common set of learnable behaviors and actions that can help leaders navigate those challenges. These behaviors, or the five practices of exemplary leadership, are: *Model the Way*, *Inspire a Shared Vision*, *Challenge the Process*, *Enable Others to Act*, and *Encourage the Heart*. The five practices are paired with the ten commitments of leadership, or the specific strategies leaders use to accomplish extraordinary things (see Figure 2).

The Leadership Challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 1987), which introduced the five practices model, emerged alongside significant changes in leadership paradigms and scholarship, often cited as a shift from industrial to postindustrial perspectives (Rost, 1991). Kouzes and Posner's continued research has led to multiple versions of *The Leadership Challenge* text, workbooks, and assessment tools, including the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI). These inventories indicate how people use the five practices, both as individuals and within the context of organizations and teams. With over 5 million LPI respondents (Kouzes & Posner, 2023), the five practices is one of the most widely used and distributed leadership models.

Although the five practices model maintains a clear distinction between leaders and followers and has been categorized as person-centered (Dugan, 2017), it emphasizes positional leaders' effectiveness a result of their success in working with group members and their awareness that leadership is fundamentally a relational process (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). Additional research connects the frequency in which leaders engage in these strategies and practices to a number of beneficial leadership outcomes (Kouzes & Posner 2023; Posner, 2015).

Model the Way
1. Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values.
2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.
Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.
Challenge the Process
5. Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve.
6. Experiment and take risks by consistently generating small wins and learning from experience.
Enable Others to Act
7. Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.
8. Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.
Encourage the Heart
9. Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

FIGURE 2 The five practices and ten commitments of exemplary leadership. *Source*: From *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* (7th ed., p.14) by J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner, 2023, John Wiley & Sons. Copyright 1987–2023 by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. Reprinted with permission.

The five practices of exemplary leadership and the relational leadership model can be effective tools for designing relational leadership curricula and programs for college students. In the following section, we explore two different applications of these models.

APPLYING RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A PEER LEADER PROGRAM

The Leadership and Community Service-Learning (LCSL) Office at the University of Maryland (UMD) engages students in experiential and community-based learning to foster socially responsible leadership. Through community engagement and leadership development experiences, students explore complex social issues, engage in socio-cultural conversations, and build leadership capacity. Although the format of engagement may vary, each LCSL program and opportunity shares a developmentally-scaffolded peer leadership structure.

The LCSL Peer Leader Program is grounded in the relational leadership model (Komives et al., 2013), the social change model of leadership development (HERI, 1996), and the

leadership identity development model (Komives et al., 2006). Components of each are implicitly and explicitly integrated into peer leader experiences through design and content. Specific to this article, the relational leadership model was selected to inform the design of LCSL peer leader roles because of its simplicity and adaptability, resonance with college students, and focus on leading through relationships. Other articles in this issue detail program design using the social change model and leadership identity development model (see Adams, Patterson, & Skendall and Yamanaka & Owen).

How the relational leadership model informs design

LCSL peer leader roles vary based on level of responsibility and program format; however, they are all guided by a shared set of learning outcomes, semesterly retreats, ongoing orientation, training, and reflective one-on-one meetings with professional staff. The peer leader program centers multifaceted relationships between the leaders and professional staff, community and campus partners, and student participants. The relational approach is furthered by having students co-facilitate every dialogue, workshop, or service activity with a fellow peer leader. The roles are designed to be a learning laboratory to practice relationship building, personal development, and leadership capacity.

From the beginning of students' engagement in the peer leader program, they encounter *purpose*. In applications and interviews, they are asked to reflect on questions such as "What does socially responsible leadership mean to you?" and "Why is engaging in the community important to you?". Prior to a fall retreat, peer leaders complete an online module learning about the collective mission, vision, and values of LCSL and the purpose of each program and initiative. During the retreat, they engage in activities to identify their own purpose, goals, and vision for their role and their program.

Each role is *empowering* by providing a specific scope of responsibilities, projects, and/or peers. Using goals they set themselves, peer leaders track and report on progress to the intern, graduate assistant, or staff member who advises them. In regular one-on-one meetings, they are provided feedback and support. To build their efficacy in delivering workshops, dialogues, and events, peer leaders are given opportunities to practice facilitating with other leaders and staff before engaging with the student participants. Peer leaders also develop agency and mutuality in relationships with staff and community partners. For example, they often co-facilitate and contribute to agendas for meetings among staff, faculty, students, and administrators from across campus. Additionally, peer leaders serve as liaisons between community partner personnel and program participants regarding organizational updates and needs.

Content during weekly training and meetings centers identity and promotes the value of *inclusion* in many ways. Peer leaders facilitating a school mentoring program learn about the public schools where they will be placed, including student and teacher demographics, the surrounding community, culture and language factors, and available assets and resources. They then compare that information to their own educational backgrounds and pathways. Peer leaders who coordinate a weekly service program engage in dialogue about their own social identities and how their identities have influenced their views on community, service, and social issues of focus (e.g., environmental justice).

The *ethical* component of relational leadership is emphasized by engaging peer leaders in decision-making processes and articulating how values are enacted through program design. For example, when selecting sites and partner organizations for Alternative Breaks, peer leaders and staff utilize a rubric that prioritizes long-term partnerships, examines community voice and sustainability, and avoids volunteer work with vulnerable populations or that exceeds the skill level of student volunteers. Additionally, peer leaders and

participants in service programs engage with articles, videos, and podcasts on ethical issues in volunteering such as charity, white saviorism, and deficit-based development.

The *process* of relational leadership is reinforced through opportunities for building community, individual and collective growth, learning, and development. Significant effort is made to form connections among peer leaders through group potlucks, homecoming competitions, seasonal gatherings, and end of year celebrations. Regular self-reflection is incorporated into peer leader and staff meetings. Peer leaders create learning agreements identifying what they hope to *know, be, and do* in their role and make coinciding presentations of learning at the conclusion of their terms (Komives et al., 2013). Additionally, peer leaders contribute to the future of their programs by compiling transition documents and nominating and training the peer leaders coming after them.

APPLYING THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

A leader in experiential learning, Elon University's Experiential Learning Requirement (ELR) aims to prepare students for meaningful lives through the integration of knowledge and experience. In order to fulfill the ELR, students must actively participate in at least two of five Elon Experiences, which include: leadership development, global engagement, internship, research, and service-learning. Engagement in these high-impact practices is grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) of preparation, action, and reflection. The result is an academic credential, which is validated through a co-curricular transcript managed by the Division of Student Life. Students can request their co-curricular transcript with their academic transcript from the Registrar's Office.

Elon students can complete the Leadership ELR through a formal leader role or through a common good initiative. Students explore the question "how might we…" to identify potential opportunities to create positive change through the application of innovative ideas and leadership skills. Examples of past common good initiatives include creating non-profits, developing youth leadership programs, proposing new residential living-learning communities, advocating for institutional policy change, starting student organizations, and leading campus civic engagement efforts. More information can be found online at https://www.elon.edu/u/leadership/leadership-fellows-common-good-initiatives/.

Students are asked to identify a faculty or staff mentor, typically an organization advisor or a supervisor, who is directly involved with their leader role or common good initiative. Over the course of a semester, students gain a greater understanding of leadership as a process, receive feedback on their individual leadership style from others, and explore issues unique to their leader role or common good initiative through self-reflection and a contextual analysis.

How the five practices of exemplary leadership inform design

Elon University's Center for Leadership utilizes the social change model of leadership development (HERI, 1996) and five practices of exemplary leadership from *The Student Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes & Posner, 2014) to ground the Leadership ELR. The five practices and the accompanying Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) were selected for several reasons. The five practices are relatable, regardless of a student's leadership knowledge, understanding, or practical experience. Students are able to con-

nect the language of the five practices to their strengths, actions, and behaviors in both formal leadership roles and informal leadership interactions. Given the wide range of institutional leadership opportunities, students can apply the five practices to a variety of collegiate contexts (e.g., leadership positions, organizations, student employment) within a self-paced, experiential learning process grounded in a relationship-rich university setting. Ultimately, the meaningful reflection opportunities through the five practices aid in individual leader development as well as in the development of leadership practice and processes in groups and teams.

Students begin the Leadership ELR by completing the socially responsible leadership scale (SRLS) (National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, n.d.), the student leadership practices inventory (SLPI), and reading excerpts from *Leadership for a Better World* (Komives & Wagner, 2016) and *The Student Leadership Challenge* (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). Three written reflections are built into the Leadership ELR experience. First, students focus on interpreting their SLPI results to create a leadership action plan to identify goals, opportunities for improvement, and potential behavior changes *(Model the Way)*. Students reflect on which of the five practices they feel most comfortable utilizing and leveraging within the context of their role or project, and then consider how they can specifically incorporate the practices more frequently. Next, students focus on understanding their leader role by writing a leadership description and mapping their SLPI findings to the scope of their role, identifying how they will work collaboratively to achieve their common purpose and goals *(Inspire a Shared Vision)*. The third reflection is a critical examination of their organization, including a review of the organization's history and mission and identifying ways to improve the organization *(Challenge the Process)*. Students analyze the organization's cultural context by examining the structure, espoused values, power dynamics, team performance, and diversity of social identities represented by the group's members.

Enabling others to act is fostered through the feedback process in the Leadership ELR. The identified mentor completes a mid-experience evaluation and the Observer SLPI, which they then utilize in a mid-experience feedback session to discuss the student's progress through their leadership role or project *(Enable Others to Act)*. Students are also asked to select two additional organization members or leaders to complete the Observer SLPI. While the Observer SLPI results may confirm the student's SLPI findings and self-reflection, it often provides a richer perspective into the practices the student may not readily utilize, feel confident in, or feel capable of executing. This feedback process helps students take informed and meaningful action toward their continued growth.

Students complete the Leadership ELR by synthesizing the information they have utilized throughout the process—assigned readings, assessments, mid-experience evaluation and feedback from their mentor, and reflection papers—into a final capstone paper. To conclude the ELR, students meet with both their mentor and the director of Elon's Center for Leadership to reflect on the entirety of the experience, celebrating the journey and accomplishments along the way *(Encourage the Heart)*.

CONSIDERATIONS IN APPLYING RELATIONAL APPROACHES

Leadership educators should pay attention to particular benefits, tensions, and limitations of the RLM and five practices when applying them to student leadership development work. While we will focus on considerations that have been most salient in the application of these models as discussed in this article, Dugan (2017) provided additional examination, deconstruction, and reconstruction of these models using critical perspectives.

Focus on collegiate contexts

Since the RLM was created specifically for college students, it has not been widely explored or applied in other contexts. As a result, students may experience dissonance when encountering more individual and authoritative approaches in their future careers. Leadership educators should consider making explicit connections between this model and students' experiences outside of college; for example, identifying other examples of relational leadership in practice, explaining how elements of the RLM show up in leadership examples outside of higher education, and investigating challenges for applying relational leadership in various environments which may not align with values of inclusion and positive social change.

Conversely, Kouzes and Posner's original research was not initially conducted with college students; they focused on industry professionals and later adapted for use with college students. The utilization of the five practices is widely documented, establishing its applicability across a range of contexts and careers; from adolescents to adults as well as within the United States and other countries (Posner, 2015). Depending on the version of the five practices resources used, leadership educators can find examples and references that are business-related, organizational, or student-oriented. We note how utilizing the related inventories does incur financial costs, which could be prohibitive to educators wanting to use the SLPI with large groups of students. However, it is possible to use the five practices in program and curriculum design without administering the SLPI. By incorporating intentional self-reflection and/or external observations based on the practices and commitments, students can nonetheless reflect on the degree to which their leadership behaviors align and where they can continue to grow.

Enactment and outcomes

Komives et al. (2013) explicitly distinguished the relational leadership model from formal theory, noting RLM does not address leadership outcomes or describe how leadership occurs within a group. Instead, the model is intended to be aspirational– providing an adaptable frame of reference to orient and guide teams and groups as well as inform one's personal leadership philosophy. To fully leverage the RLM, educators may want to articulate leadership outcomes for a designated group or process and identify methods by which to measure those outcomes. Additionally, educators can integrate opportunities for students to develop group goals or individual action plans based on the philosophies of the RLM.

The Leadership Challenge identifies specific behaviors and ways to enact the five practices as well as related outcomes such as leader effectiveness, organizational commitment, and goal achievement (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). It is important to note while the authors state leadership skills and abilities are available to anyone, their research only ties leadership outcomes to the behaviors of positional leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Educators using this model should work to emphasize collective outcomes and the role each group member plays in contributing to those outcomes. Additionally, Dugan (2017) pointed out the lack of a clear articulation of how the five practices interact with one another and asked whether there is an order effect in how a leader should engage with them. Engaging students in critical analysis and exploration of the interactions between the five practices can expand their learning around the model. While Kouzes and Posner provided recommendations on how one can further develop their leadership capacity and enactment, they gave little attention to the other leadership development domains of motivation and efficacy. To fully leverage the five practices in program design and curricula, educators may want

to consider how they measure a student's leadership self-efficacy and develop programs, activities, or exercises to grow leadership self-efficacy and motivation.

Examining systems and centering justice

One of the priorities in the 2020–2025 National Leadership Education Research Agenda emphasized how "…the next evolutionary step in understanding leadership learning will require centering socially just processes and outcomes in leadership education research" (Chunoo et al., 2020, p. 46). The RLM and five practices of Exemplary Leadership are limited in this regard, albeit in different ways. In discussing the five practices model, Kouzes and Posner (2023) acknowledged, "words and phrases such as diversity-equity-inclusion … resonate with the newer generations of workers" (p. 127) but provided little attention to how or why diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are essential to effective leadership or their research. While inclusion is explicitly acknowledged as a core component of the RLM, and various forms of diversity are addressed in RLM literature, the model does not adequately address intersections of social identities, socialization processes, or hegemonic dynamics found in modern society. Effective use of both the RLM and five practices requires acknowledgment and exploration of the impact of social and personal identities on engagement in the leadership approaches and behaviors named in both models.

Effective leadership educators consider how diversity, equity, and inclusion both inform and shape leadership education experiences by ensuring that theory-informed curriculum also centers lived experiences, salient social identities, and personal narratives of leadership. We advise supplementing these models with others that utilize critical social theories and/or articulate social justice as a value and goal of leadership (see Correia-Harker in this issue for more on theory and model weaving). Incorporating articles, examples, videos, or podcasts that amplify queer, black, indigenous, Latinx, and other perspectives also aids in this effort. Intentionally creating space for students to wrestle with the role of social identity and interrogate and name the dominant narratives that influence one's relational expectations, perceptions, assumptions, and behaviors can ensure students with marginalized identities are also represented in program design and curriculum.

Perhaps now more than ever, it is important to emphasize "relationships are the key to leadership effectiveness" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 43). If intentionally designed to do so, collegiate leadership programs and curricula are particularly well suited to cultivate a relational mindset and skills among students.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND FACILITATION RESOURCES

For those seeking to incorporate the RLM or five practices of exemplary leadership into courses and programs, the resources listed below are a good place to start for more information.

- Dugan, J. P., Turman, N., & Barnes, A. C. (2017). *Leadership theory: Facilitator's guide for cultivating critical perspectives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kouzes, J. M., Posner, B. Z., Guy, B., Morgan, G. M. (2013). *The student leadership challenge: Facilitator and activity guide*. (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kouzes, J. M., Posner, B. Z., Guy, B., Morgan, G. M. (2013). *The student leadership challenge: Student workbook and personal leadership journal*. (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

- Wagner, W., Ostick, D. T. (2013). *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference, facilitation and activity guide*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Wagner, W., Ostick, D. T. (2013). *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference, student workbook*. John Wiley & Sons.

We also encourage leadership educators to explore relational leadership themes found in other theories and models as they read through the articles in this issue of *New Directions for Student Leadership*.

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Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1987). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2014). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for becoming an exemplary leader* (2nd ed.). Wiley.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (6th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2023). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (7th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Posner, B. Z. (2004). A leadership development instrument for students: Updated. *Journal of College Student Development*, *45*(4), 443–456. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0051

Posner, B. Z. (2015). *Bringing the rigor of research to the art of leadership: Evidence behind the five practices of exemplary leadership® and the LPI®: Leadership Practices Inventory®*. The Leadership Challenge. https://www.leadershipchallenge.com/LeadershipChallenge/media/SiteFiles/research/TLC-Research-to-the-Art-of-Leadership.pdf

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Dana Carnes Pursley (she/her/hers) serves as the Director of the Alford Community Leadership and Involvement Center at Denison University. In her career, Dana has provided oversight and direction within residence life, leadership education, campus organizations, student government, fraternity and sorority life, community service and civic engagement, and large-scale programming and campus traditions. Dana previously served as the Associate Director of the Center for Leadership at Elon University and in residence life roles at Wittenberg University and Otterbein University.