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**Stepping Up, Stepping Back – Metaphors of Leadership**

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## **Introduction:**

This working paper reports on a longitudinal inductive study that seeks to elicit and explore the naturally occurring metaphors and implicit leadership theories (ILT) used by leaders of business to describe their own leadership and development. The proposition of this research is that when those in leadership roles reveal, explore and connect with their inner metaphorical landscapes they access greater understanding of their construction of leadership, greater self-awareness about their internal frames and external actions including the implications for themselves, the people and organisations they lead. The research comprises 30 leaders in international business and combines a novel research method using Clean Language to elicit and explore metaphors with drawings to depict the metaphorical landscapes and implicit leadership theories (ILT) described in the interviews.

The paper addresses the conference theme of reflecting on the past and shaping the future. Past research about metaphors and leadership have typically been deductive, i.e. coming from the researcher to describe leadership through the researchers eyes and metaphors and applying these to organisations or leadership. This research study has the potential to contribute to the shape of future research about leadership by taking an inductive approach to exploring the naturally occurring metaphors of leaders.

This paper provides the context for this research – the drivers of why it matters, an overview of the research approach including a brief review of leadership and leadership development. This is followed by the sample and the methodology. Findings in three broad categories are offered, although note at the time of writing data are still being collected so results are preliminary.

## **Context:**

The context for this study has twin tracks – the “practice-based” world of leadership development and the other “focused on theory” within the academic community (Marshall, 1999) p.4. These twin tracks are interwoven in this research study, which aims to support leaders in organisations to develop their authentic models of leadership and to contribute to the academic debates about leadership development. The twin tracks are also an integral part of organisations like UFHRD or UNICON, which bring together practitioners and academics to build relevant theory.

Leadership is an extensive area of practice and research that has been studied in many ways - described as an art (Grint, 2000) that is essentially subjective, symbolic and context-specific (Conger, 1998) and yet much development of this art is approached from an external universal perspective through teaching frameworks, models and theories. Frameworks and models can be useful, it is their over-use that can imply that there is ‘a right way to do leadership’ and divert people’s attention away from understanding their own signature strengths and developmental needs. Hence, this external focus might distract attention from the artistry of individual leaders.

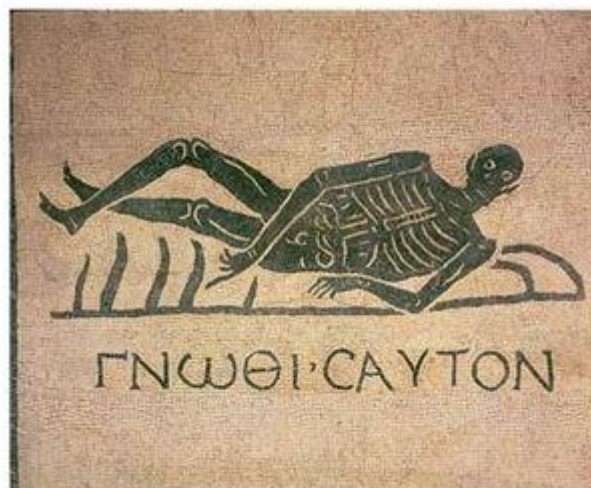
Scholars have noted that leadership development is largely a matter of personal development, which is “the process of becoming more aware of one’s self” (Hall, 2004 p.154). The first

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author’s experience over the last 20 years in leadership development recognises this desire for self-knowledge. During the last five years she has collated the responses of over 200 people from international organisations on leadership development programs at IMD business school in Switzerland about their expectations. The top two responses are:

- ✓ To understand myself
- ✓ To learn about the strengths and weaknesses of my leadership.

These expectations of twentieth century leaders resonate with the timeless inscription, “Know Thyself,” on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi dating 2000 years back. It is as if despite all the theories of leadership, people know that we lead from who we are and therefore to enhance leadership we need to look inward at ourselves and develop our self-knowledge. A special issue of *Harvard Business Review* declared “Know Thyself” to be leadership’s first commandment (Collingwood, 2001 p.8).



This research therefore aims to respond to this desire articulated by many engaged in leadership development experiences to better understand themselves and their leadership. The research seeks to discover what leaders can learn about their leadership and its development from awareness of their mental models illuminated by an exploration of their naturally occurring metaphors and implicit leadership theories (ILT). This enquiry follows the challenge to look for evidence that “different metaphors generate different conceptualisations of leadership” (Oberlechner and Mayer-Schönberger, 2003 p.172).

### **Research Overview:**

Leadership has been practiced, studied and debated for years subsequently the literature on leadership is extensive and so it is important to be discerning about how to approach this vast domain. There are multiple theories that have been used to understand it such as Great Man,

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Trait, Behavioural or Style Approach, Situational, Contingency, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Transformational and Authentic (Northouse, 2012, Yukl, 1994). Most of these theories can be seen as grounded in one or more the following perspectives; leadership as a combination of characteristics of personality or traits; leadership as a set of skills or behaviours and leadership as a process or relationship. These are critical conceptual differences influencing the way leadership is viewed, practiced, researched and developed. As these differences are not resolved, there is no consensus either in practice or in the literature “about the essence of leadership, or the means by which it can be identified, achieved or measured” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985 p.259). It remains therefore a contested term for complex and multi-faceted phenomena in part due its dynamism, multiple levels of analysis and it’s subjective and symbolic nature (Conger, 1998).

Over the years several major shifts have been witnessed in leadership theory: 1) a shift from a focus on individual influence to shared influence, 2) the realisation that leadership needs to be adaptive to the situation and 3) the move towards authentic and ethical leadership. In addition to the evolving theories there have also been several major influences on the theory and practice of leadership including gender, psychodynamics, mindfulness and implicit leadership theories. These influences have had a significant impact on leadership practice and research due to the rise of the number of women in the workforce and in leadership roles; the recognition of how psychological issues affect the workplace for example, the role of motivation, emotions and group dynamics at work; the impact of how action follows thought and therefore the need to pay attention to the content of the mind and finally implicit leadership theories, which are the everyday ways in which people make sense of life. In short, theory has developed from an individual attribute reserved for heroes and those with the right dispositions for leadership to a more relational, contextually understood search for authenticity.

As Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) are an important part of this research, a brief account of ILT follows. In short, ILT are everyday images in the minds of people about leadership. Rather than a theory derived externally, ILT are the internal mental representations of what people think leadership is. The term was introduced by Eden and Leviatan in deduced from implicit personality theories (1975). ILT have been likened to stereotypes (Schneider, 1973) as they serve to explain and predict behaviour (Schyns and Schilling, 2011). It has been said that ILT develop in childhood (Antonakis and Dalgas, 2009, Ayman-Nolley and Ayman, 2005) that they are stable over time (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004) and that they have both individual and social aspects to them (House and Aditya, 1997).

As ILT operate out of awareness it is unlikely that people are aware of the images they hold and how these influence their perception of leadership in general, their own leadership specifically and that of colleagues. Research by Schyns et al (2011) suggests that surfacing ILT can assist leaders to develop self and social awareness as well as clarify identity, improve motivation and increase their development and behavioural range. So it can be seen that ILT has a big impact on individual leaders and potentially their development and sense of identity.

ILT, operating largely out of conscious awareness, have a big impact on the beliefs of leaders and through these beliefs to leaders’ behaviour and their exercise of leadership. This study seeks to see what leaders can learn when they take into account the influence that these

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everyday mental models have on the practice and development of leadership.

Authentic leadership is chosen as the foundation for this study as it has been claimed to be the root construct for all positive forms of leadership development and because it emphasises an intrapersonal and developmental perspective, which are crucial for developing the individual capacity to lead. It also highlights the critical role of self-awareness (Avolio et al., 2004 ). However, current authentic leadership theory does not explain how self-awareness is developed. It is suggested that this study can contribute to this theoretical understanding through illuminating a process by which leaders can become aware of their mental models and enhance their self-awareness thus making a contribution to how authentic leadership might be developed.

Yet, how in practice do people develop their leadership? This disarmingly simple question has received much attention beyond the scope of this short paper but includes what leaders need to learn. The Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL), the world’s largest organisation dedicated to leadership research and education, suggests that it is vital to develop capabilities in three areas:

1. **Self-management** including self-awareness, the ability to balance conflicting demands and the ability to learn.
2. **Social** including the ability to build and maintain relationships, the ability to build and maintain groups, communication skills and the ability to develop others.
3. **Work-facilitation** including management skills, the ability to think and act strategically, the ability to think creatively and the ability to initiate and implement change (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2003).

The CCL research reflects a large body of scholarly thinking about developing leadership at different levels of analysis; the individual, the group and the organisational. The focus of leadership development programmes is often on the visible and urgent activities related to the business environment, corresponding to the Work-facilitation aspect of the CCL model. This can distract attention from development of a more personal internal nature – for example the invisible ways that the inner mental maps of leaders shape their thoughts and actions.

Responding to the claim that “leaders may be unaware of the degree to which their models are shaping their leadership behaviours” (Hackman and Wageman, 2007 p.46), this inductive research seeks to explore how leaders can become more aware of their mental models and the implications of these models on their leadership and development.

It is suggested that the articulation and recognition of leaders own implicit models could contribute to a more robust sense of self through lessening dependence on other people’s frameworks and creating a greater acceptance of one’s own models. This is what Robert Keegan terms the evolving self (1982) which is an increasing reliance on one’s own authorship of life.

This research uses Clean Language to reveal and explore these internal mental models often held in metaphor. Metaphor is said to be the very foundation of our conceptual system (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). It is fundamentally a way of thinking. It is also a way to think about

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thinking. Metaphor has a long history as part of mankind’s sense making, hailed by some as the sign of genius and dismissed by others as frilly labels.

This study aims to add a small contribution to the development of self-awareness in leadership development by understanding leaders’ mental models illuminated by an exploration of their self-generated and naturally occurring metaphors and implicit leadership theories (ILT) as a way to develop more authentic leadership. This aims to respond to the calls from Gardner et al (2005) to understand more about how authentic leadership is developed and from Nichols and Erakovich (2013) to develop authentic leadership through attention to ILT and from Johnson (2008) for leaders to take responsibility for their own development by paying attention to their mental models. Whilst work exists on ILT and on metaphor and leadership there have been few if any attempts to understand leadership through connecting these two lenses and certainly none to the knowledge of the authors that have used Clean Language as a way to elicit metaphors.

### **Sample:**

The research is based on depth interviews with 30 people who hold positions of leadership in international business. These participants represent a diagonal slice of leadership roles in diverse organisations, chosen as part of a heterogeneous purposive sample. Leaders from varying functional backgrounds in different organisations representing different industries are included to provide breadth to the study. The research has a mix of two thirds male and one third female leaders from different nationalities and linguistic origins. The sample includes leaders with different amounts of leadership experience in order to see if and how this impacts implicit leadership theories, self-awareness and self-development. This sample responds to the recommendation by Nichols and Erakovich (2013) to undertake research with heterogeneous samples to operationalize the link between ILT and authenticity. It also follows their suggestion that more research is needed with experienced leaders to further understand the links between beliefs (the ILT), behaviour and expectations of leadership by examining what a robust but select sample of experienced leaders can learn about their leadership through their own words.

Participants have been identified based on voluntary interest in the research through a letter of invitation. Voluntary, informed written consent was obtained from all participants and standard ethical principles have been followed (Saunders et al., 2012). Pragmatically, access for face-to-face interviews has been a consideration in the selection of the sample. Qualitative research can be time intensive and data heavy, thus samples are determined by considerations of time and budget restraints as well as methodological objectives. As part of these considerations face-to-face interviews have been held in Switzerland, the UK and the Netherlands. Thus amongst the sample of 14 nationalities, there are seven Dutch and four British leaders. Non-European nationalities, such as Mexican, Turkish, American and Omani are included in the sample as they are either based in Europe or spend significant amounts of time in global roles in Europe. Only seven participants have English as their mother tongue, all other participants speak English as a second language. Participants’ age varies from 32 – 62, providing a broad range of age and experience in leadership roles.

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## **Methodology:**

As a longitudinal study, two interviews have been conducted with each participant with four – twelve weeks between each interview. The length of time between interviews was dependent on availability of participants. The first interview was fully transcribed and sent to participants for review. Participants were asked to draw their representations of leadership at the end of the interview, which was also sent to participants.

The interview protocol for both the first and second interviews were developed in consultation with Dr. Paul Tosey, the pioneer of using Clean Language as a phenomenological research method (Tosey et al., 2014) and with James Lawley, co-author of *Metaphors in Mind* (2000) and arguably one of the leading Clean Language experts worldwide, along with his partner Penny Tompkins. Reviewing the protocols with these experts ensured that the questions were as clean as possible. Note that in Clean Language, whilst the aim is to be as Clean as possible, it is acknowledged that it is unrealistic to be totally clean due to the pervasive nature of metaphor in thought and speech (Tosey et al., 2014). Additionally the first author tested the interview protocol with James Lawley asking her the questions.

The first interview asked questions about three areas - the leaders' implicit leadership theories, their experience of being a leader and their development as a leader. Following the interview participants were asked to draw their representations of leadership – this builds on the work of Bryans and Mavin (2006) to use visual techniques in qualitative research. The second interview asked about what they noticed about the interview, the protocol and the drawings; what, if any, value they got out of the interview, the transcript and the drawings. They were asked what if anything they learned about their leadership and what if anything they learned about their development from the process. Finally participants were asked to draw and comment upon the process. First interviews typically lasted one and a half hours, although several lasted two hours. It was feasible to conduct the interview in an hour but this limited the time for exploration of different metaphors. Second interviews were typically a bit shorter, lasting one hour 15 minutes – one hour 30 minutes.

The first interview was conducted using Clean Language (CL), which is a process to facilitate exploration of the inner world. CL is notable for its fidelity to the client's inner world and lack of interference from the hence the term Clean. It originated from David Grove's (1989) work in clinical environments and has been developed as a process of facilitation and communication by Lawley and Tompkins (2000) as a way to aid self-discovery and development through it's attention to naturally occurring metaphors. Clean Language has been pioneered as a phenomenological research methodology for interviewing and analysing metaphors (Tosey, 2011). It is suggested that using Clean Language in the interviews will minimise contamination of participant data and that the resulting interviews will be faithful to the implicit leadership theories of the respondents.

The title of Lawley & Tompkins book, “*Symbolic Modelling*” (2000) demonstrates the importance of both symbol and modelling in the approach. They state that it is a systemic process in which, “Modelling is the methodology, metaphor the medium, and Clean Language is the means” (p. 1). One of the principles of Clean Language is that it is information-centred which “respects that information is sourced in a number of different places: semantically,

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somatically, spatially, and also temporally in biographical, ancestral and cultural time” [David Grove, 1998 online retrieval]. The importance of being information centred is that this places attention on the client’s internal mental model so that through facilitation they will know more about these models and how they do things in the ‘real’ world.

Staying with the clients’ inner landscape is easier in theory than in practice. Clean Language replicates not only the clients words but also their vocal qualities and gestures. This total approach, words, vocal quality, syntax and gestures aims to stay with the client’s total experience of their metaphorical map, which may be embodied in gestures, pauses in speech and emotions as much as in obvious linguistic metaphors. Both authors are certified facilitators in Clean Language and a review of the transcripts shows that the interviews were “Clean” i.e. the interviewer (first author) remained very largely faithful to the words of the participants. This is exemplified in a number of participants stating that the interview was like “having a conversation with myself” - they forgot that the interviewer was there.

### **Metaphor:**

Metaphor is a subject as large and disputed as leadership with origins back to Aristotle, who claimed, “it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh” (Aristotle, 1924(a)). Metaphor is fundamental to thought and language. It has been used in theory building in domains as diverse as the natural sciences, mathematics, psychology and the social sciences. Examples across domains, some of which are considered unsympathetic to the use of metaphor, illustrate that, as Gergen states, “without metaphor scientific thinking as whole would remain paralyzed” (1990 p.267). Indeed, Leary and others including (Smith, 1985) suggest that because metaphorical concepts are transformative in nature and not just descriptive their use leads to a change in self-consciousness, which both originates in metaphorical thinking and results from it. This is a major claim and important for this study which aims to explore how leaders can enhance their self-awareness through the exploration of naturally occurring metaphors.

As metaphor helps understand abstract, complex phenomena it is often used in leadership research. Indeed, metaphor has been said to be the very foundation of our conceptual system (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). However, metaphor has been contested in social science research. Its advocates suggest that it offers new ways of seeing and framing experience and that it can generate new knowledge. Its detractors claim that it is vague, unscientific and overly subjective. However, a number of scholars such as Weick and Lakoff and Johnson point out that it's ability to bring together reasoning with imagination is vital and explains why it plays such an enduring role in thought and communication. It is part of sensemaking as it represents “disciplined imagination” (Weick, 1989) and is seen to bring rational thought and subjective imagination together in a synthesis of “imaginative rationality” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Morgan, the scholar most associated with introducing metaphor into organizational analysis reminds us that metaphor is by nature partial and biased and that much of its power stems from reminding people to realise the partial nature of their mental models.

Karl Pribram (1990) has made a persuasive case for differentiating between metaphor, analogical reasoning and models, suggesting they are three steps in a process that is fundamental to thinking and to scientific innovation. The process starts with gathering insight



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from a metaphor. At this stage some similarities between different things are noticed but the focus is typically quite broad and general. The second stage involves analogical reasoning, which aims to refine or “trim” the metaphor by comparing the similarities and differences between the two domains. Finally the modelling stage involves transforming the metaphor into a model that can be shared and tested more broadly. Pribram uses the example of how brain scientists have used metaphors to understand the brain with increasing precision to articulate that it is through analogical reasoning that metaphors are transformed into models that can then guide further action, research, reflection and refinement. He states; “metaphorical insight, reasoned analogy, and empirical modelling are woven together” (1990 p.98).

Hence metaphor and models can be linked as a way to conceptualise complex matters and this is how metaphor and modelling are linked in this study to find out what leaders can learn about their own models of leadership and the implications for its practice and development through an exploration of their own naturally occurring metaphors.

### **Findings:**

At the time of writing data are still being collected. Preliminary results, which will be fine-tuned during analysis, are suggested in three broad areas, reviewed below;

1. Metaphor-based profiles can be formulated for each leader – suggesting idiosyncratic ways in which leaders conceptualise and practice leadership.
2. Insights into self-reflection highlight the need to take a step back from daily activities in order to take time and space to think, to reconsider and review thought and action. It also suggests the need to stay with the discomfort of phases of not knowing, of embarrassment in order to get to a new stage of clarity.
3. Insight into the process of articulating leaders’ models of leadership – typically moving from a vague, “tangled” set of ideas to a clearer formulation of their model of leadership. Drawings of the process illuminate the process of discovery as part of self-awareness.

### **Finding 1 – Idiosyncratic Metaphor Maps of Leadership:**

Three examples of the very different metaphors used by leaders to describe their ideas about and experience of leadership are offered in the table below. It can be seen that they are fundamentally different from one another – a game of chess, a journey and a scale balancing value and credit. These three examples are representative of the total sample in terms of being very idiosyncratic to the individual leaders. Further discussion of these examples will be given during the presentation once further analysis has taken place.

One of the early questions asked about the research was whether everyone can think in metaphor or find a resonant metaphor. The research shows conclusively that all of the participants in the study thought in metaphor and described aspects of their leadership experience in metaphor. Some participants used many more metaphors than others yet the pervasive use of metaphor in the interviews replicates Cameron (2008) findings about the

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ubiquitous use of metaphor. Several participants were surprised about how many metaphors they actually used that they were completely unaware of. This highlights the importance of making ubiquitous, unconscious metaphors more visible and accessible. One of the ways in which the research aimed to do this was by asking participants to draw their leadership landscape, which helped crystallise the most resonant metaphors for the participants. Asking participants to draw what they know after a session is a practice in Clean Language and despite some initial worry about lack of drawing skills, all participants drew metaphors that encapsulated key aspects of their landscape.

Leader	Metaphors	Key Aspects to Metaphor
6	Chess Game	Chess, Pieces, Play, Figure Out, Move Ahead, Puzzle, Compass
12	Journey	Journey, Train, Up, Down, Forward, Back, Painting the Picture of the Destination, Seeing over the Horizon,
28	Value	Balance, Value, Currency, 2 sides of Coin, Small Change, High Value, Credit

### **Finding 2 – Self Reflection:**

The exploration seemed to enable leaders to get in touch with their authentic models of leadership through bringing into awareness and making visible the ways in which they think about their craft. Comments such as “This has been really useful to help me reflect about how I lead, when I step in and when I step back” (participant 28) and “I really like this metaphor that I have found. It really speaks to me and I can use it to consider my leadership” (participant 17).

Even those participants who found less value in the exploration of their metaphors found the opportunity to step back and reflect highly valuable. The title of this paper is stepping in, stepping back because almost all of the 30 participants used this metaphor of stepping in or up to leadership and stepping back to allow others to lead, to develop others or to take time to reflect. The phrases stepping in or stepping up are well known, yet the research shows that this is an almost ubiquitous metaphor related to leadership. The idea of stepping *up* is in line with Lakoff and Johnson’s findings that up is good and is an example of an orientational metaphor that gives a concept – i.e. leadership - spatial orientation. Lakoff and Johnson claim that these orientations are not arbitrary but are based on our physical and cultural experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Stepping back was almost as ubiquitously used to portray two ideas. One is of giving leaders time to reflect, to look further ahead by scanning the horizon to see what else needs attention. The other is to actively develop others by giving space for them to step in. It is very interesting to note that leaders do not step down or sideways, perhaps because this might infer an involuntary move. Rather they step back – which seems to imply volition – an active choice to enable someone else to lead. This might seem like a small detail amidst a larger study but it seems to have important implications for leaders creating the conditions to reflect.

Another finding is that many of the participants had some initial discomfort in the interview, wanting some reassurance that they were giving the “right” answers or checking with the interviewer that their responses were what were required. Despite the seniority of these people, it took typically 5-15 minutes of the interview for participants to let go of a concern of whether what they said was right or wrong and to focus on what they actually thought. There are a number of implications of this. Firstly, that it takes uninterrupted time and space to pay

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attention to what we think rather than to be concerned with what others think about what we think. Secondly, seemingly “helpful” responses of reassurance from the interviewer could pull the participant away from their own thoughts. This is the beauty of Clean Language, when the facilitator resists the emotional pull to give re-assurance, the participant is free to explore their inner world without contamination.

### **Finding 3 – Insight into the Process:**

Participants have equally idiosyncratic responses to the process itself. The research enquired into whether the interview, the transcript and or the drawing were of value. Most participants found the interview useful and illuminating – a space to think that many described as almost like having a conversation with themselves. The interview was described as like “being in therapy but in a good way!” and like “being a goldfish in a bowl – having time to just think about my own thoughts without distractions”.

There was a mixed reaction to the transcript. Most participants found it to be useful to have a reminder of what they said, to “see if they agreed with themselves”. Most participants valued the transcript as a precious reminder of what they think and almost all said, yes that is me and that is what I think. Several were proud of what they had said and felt that with some fine-tuning they would re-use the content. However some participants did not like the transcript, finding it embarrassing to read their words, to see on paper their lack of clarity and their stumbling self-expression. Still others who did not appreciate the transcript found it boring. Using the vivid metaphor of one participant, “it was like going to a great performance (the interview) and then reading the script afterwards – boring”.

The drawing is the part that received most polarized reaction. Many people were critical of their drawing abilities yet whether or not people could draw was secondary to whether they appreciated the drawing. Those who were critical of their drawings and who had done the drawing because it was asked of them as an act of goodwill often did not deem the drawing to be of great value. It was something done for the good of the research rather than for the individual. However a sizable number really appreciated the drawing, preferring it to the transcript as a vivid reminder of the essence of the conversation. For a number of participants their drawings (often comprising stick people) were held in much affection as they resonated deeply for participants as they showed the essence of an hour and half of thinking and talking. Using drawing in leadership development is not something that is typical yet the reactions of approximately one third – one half (numbers being verified) suggest that using more visual forms of expression might be useful.

Participants were also asked to draw and describe the process as a whole as the final part of the interview. There were several recurrent themes – cloudy or otherwise unclear images becoming clearer, more in focus with a sense of understanding why people thought the way they thought. The process was said to illuminate something in a dark area and several participants talked of the depth of the process, like deep sea fishing for hidden treasure at the bottom of the ocean or reaching far back into one’s mind for answers to questions they had not previously posed or connected, yet on reflection seemed central to their practice of leadership. Almost all participants also said they also felt completely safe during the process and were surprised to have revealed thoughts they never know they had. Most participants were

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positive about the process. This might represent a bias in the sample group, or might be the result of having paid exquisite attention to themselves. This is an on-going question in the research.

These preliminary findings provide early outcomes of the research and directions for further consideration.

### **Contribution:**

This research aims to understand the subjective nature of leadership and builds upon the work of scholars who have located the development of leadership in its personalisation (Petriglieri et al., 2011). The study aims to understand how leaders can develop their self-awareness through attention to their metaphors and ILT. Additionally, leaders are encouraged to represent what they know from the interviews in images. This builds on the use of visual techniques in leadership development (Schyns et al., 2013) (Bryans and Mavin, 2006) and extends it by exploring naturally occurring metaphors and ILT in relation to the leaders own personal mental models rather than in relation to more general models of leadership. The research has continued the work of Tosey (Tosey, 2011) and Ward, Tosey et al (Ward et al., 2013) in using Clean Language as a research methodology.

The contribution of this study is to be found through an intrapersonal approach to leader development. Whilst there has been significant work done on leadership development, self-awareness, implicit leadership theories, mental models and metaphor, there seems to be a gap in linking these areas. Nichols and Erakovich (2013) have linked authentic leadership and implicit leadership theory and suggested that further work is needed with people in leadership roles in organisations to understand more about the link between implicit leadership theories and authentic leadership. This research attempts to bridge that gap through the longitudinal study of 30 international business leaders.

Key findings suggest the idiosyncratic nature of leadership, of leadership development and the process of self-awareness. This has implications for the ways in which leadership is developed and also for the development process of self-awareness – itself described as, “deep sea fishing to find treasure” and an “on-going way of finding one’s direction with an inner compass”.

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