

## **Maximizing the value of values-based leadership (VBL): a reconceptualization for leaders and organizations**

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### **Summary**

- Research Questions:** Over the last two - three decades or so, a plethora of research has been conducted on values-based leadership (VBL) and related leadership constructs. However, has any real progress been made? Could a change in focus contribute more value to the practical and theoretical implications of VBL?
- Methods:** The Research Questions are addressed via a reconceptualization of VBL itself, along with an expansion of its scope to include follower, leader, and organizational components.
- Results:** A broader operational definition of the VBL construct is proposed; it is argued that assumptions regarding the existence of a universal desired set of values (including ethics) do not belong; and follower perceptions of leader effectiveness should take precedence over reliance on leader self-reports. Focus should be redirected on several aspects of fit: that between the stated and lived values of the leader; between the values of the leaders and their followers; and between the leaders and the organization.
- Structure of the article:** Abstract; Introduction; Literature Review; Proposed Shift in Focus; Examples of the Applicability Surrounding the Proposed VBL Approach; Conclusions; About the Authors; Bibliography

## Introduction

Recently, criticism of the lack of advancement in leadership theory over the past few decades has been strong. Alvesson (2020), Alvesson & Einola (2019), and Banks et. al. (2020) have cast aspersions at Authentic and Ethical Leadership theories, specifically, and general leadership theory as well. Primarily, the criticisms surround the lack of agreement on the conceptualization of the constructs and lack of rigorous empirical investigations. Values-based leadership (VBL) is a relatively new construct and is one of the more prominent approaches to leadership today (Lestrange & Tolstikov-Mast, 2013). This interest is attributed to the implosions of several high-profile companies and other corporate scandals led by flawed leadership (Copeland, 2014). House and Aditya (1997) claim that VBL emerged to address the deficiencies in charismatic and other leadership theories. However, VBL theory currently suffers from the same criticisms lobbed at other leadership theories, discussed above. A review of the literature addressing VBL demonstrates a lack of agreement as to what it entails as there are a wide array of operational definitions in use. In addition, while most of the published work on VBL is conceptual, what little empirical work there is focuses on the organization and/or the leader as the unit of analysis. At the macro-level, VBL involves a connection between the goals of an organization and the values that the organization wishes to emphasize to stakeholders. Most research to date has also occurred at the organizational level and revolved around the relationship between the values of a leader and those of the organization. Further, the majority of applicable empirical research on the subject has utilized leader self-report data which is subject to issues of reliability and validity threats, such as social desirability and self-report biases.

We argue that understanding the relationship between an organization and VBL exhibited by an individual will be impossible without first confirming that the construct of VBL is indeed present, as opposed to assuming its presence. To identify the presence of VBL, behaviors of the leader must be examined in order to determine if there is consistency between their actions and stated values. Here, a couple of old adages may be

applicable: *one can talk the talk, but do they walk the walk?* (Morris, 2000); also, *actions speak louder than words*. We believe that, in order to truly understand leader behavior and consistency or inconsistency with action (outcomes), focus must first be transferred from the organization as the unit of analysis to that of the individual leader without relying solely on leader self-report data. Therefore, in examining the presence or non-existence of VBL, we introduce that it is imperative that the assessment of leader consistency between stated values and behaviors not come from self-report data alone, but rather incorporate input from the leader's followers. More specifically, we argue that the only way to realistically assess whether a leader is practicing VBL is by asking those being "led" what values they would ascribe to the leader based on how they perceive being led. In other words, from the follower's perspective, are observed leader behaviors consistent with what values the leader espouses as being important to them?

With these understandings in mind, we will attempt to present a definition of VBL in the context of a follower-based perspective. Frost (2014) commented from the follower-based perspective that "Values are not what you say they are but what your colleagues and clients say they are based on their experiences" (p. 124). In the context of goal setting, Kerns (2005) defines effective managers as those who are clear about the values they hold, effective in communicating those values to stakeholders, and whose actions indicate alignment between actions and espoused values. These relationships between a leader and followers through shared value commitment from a leader originate from House and Aditya (1997), as well as Lestrange & Tolstikov-Mast, (2013). Values must not only be communicated to a follower from a leader, but also must be visible either through observation or measurement. Considering this, our operational definition of VBL in this paper is: *Values-based leaders are open in sharing personal values with stakeholders and their actions and decision-making processes are consistent with those values, while being transparent and observed by followers and stakeholders.*

Adjunct to our discussion of values-based leaders, we discuss the concept of a Values-Based Organization (VBO). VBOs encompass leadership and followers (as direct reports and stakeholders) with congruent operationalizations of mission and vision statements and

organizational practices. Consistent actions by a leader create trust when stakeholder and organizational values are aligned. A match between espoused values or “theories of action” and lived “theories in use” (Davis, 2010; p.39) can then be observed in an organizational setting. Followers are attracted to organizations that have a culture that is similar to their own, exhibiting fit (Viinamäki, 2009). A leader’s effectiveness is increased when their values most closely match the values of the organization (Fernandez & Hogan, 2002). The combination of written values, along with consistent actions that support those values are a powerful example or demonstration of values in action (Heathfield, 2018) on behalf of the organization.

## Literature Review

Values are said to be a critical factor related to quality and innovation (Grant, 2016). Failures of leadership by organizations such as Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco International as we journeyed into the 21<sup>st</sup> century served to highlight leadership deficiencies in existing approaches, such as seemingly transformational leaders, where moral and ethical deficiencies emerged (Copeland, 2014). Prior to the leadership failures of many well-known corporations, Yukl (1989) stated that the field of leadership was said to be in a state of confusion with weaknesses found throughout the existing theories and “contradictory and inconclusive” (p. 253) results from thousands of empirical studies. In the decades that followed, researchers began to re-focus and place emphasis on moral and ethical considerations with regards to leadership theories (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003; Hunt, 2017; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Bao & Li, 2019) which included research of authentic leadership (Sendjaya et. al., 2016; Avolio et al. 2004), ethical leadership (Zhu et al., 2019; Kaptein, 2019; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), and transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Price, 2003), among others. In fact, there was a resurgence or development of many leadership theories identified as VBL constructs (charismatic, servant, spiritual, shared, etc.) throughout this period (Copeland, 2014).

However, each theory presented focuses on its own unique aspect of the overall values-based leadership concept (Hendrikz & Engelbrecht, 2019) without a core

understanding of VBL itself, and without integrating the findings of the various leadership theories (Latham, 2014). Therefore, while research trends can be viewed as taking a more recent holistic view of leadership by incorporating the interactions between leaders and followers in context (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), there is still a focus on individual theories that continue to be siloed with calls to avoid construct redundancy among values-based leadership theories (Klenke, 2007). However, this redundancy seems inevitable if research theorists remain within their own lane, so to speak, and research continues to focus on various individual theories; each with their own varied measures of leadership. This indicates the need for distillation of these theories into a coherent leadership paradigm.

With an abundance of research surrounding the many different leadership approaches available that look at behaviors, traits, and skills among others, one may get the impression that success in leadership can be universally identified by a particular and precise mixture of some or any of these. Here, once discovered, one simply would need to apply the yet identified formula for success. This mindset may convince many to remain focused on one specific theory within which key aspects might be identified. However, in pursuit of this magic formula which implies progress, it should be noted that in 2000, referencing unknown author(s), Hunt and Dodge shared that one only need to step away from leadership research to find that, upon returning, it would be as if they had never left; something they called the “*déjà vu effect*” (p. 436). Thus, it would seem that while there have been two decades of research since that time, along with an increase in research surrounding VBL, research continues to find itself struggling to identify a collective vision and understanding of leadership - now to include VBL along with it.

In contrast to VBL research remaining individual theory specific, Hendrikz and Engelbrecht (2019), while looking at authentic, servant, transformational, and ethical leadership in pursuit of developing a collective scale surrounding principled leadership, comment that there is considerable overlap (a view shared by Larsson & Eid, 2012; Latham, 2014) as the theories have similar emphasis on the “importance and effectiveness of moral leadership” (p. 4). This serves to not discount the contributions to date of each individual values-based theory as they each make unique contributions and their development brings

researchers to this moment in time, rather, the charge for researchers may now be to synthesize the foundational literature into a newly evolved VBL model that is a result of the collective contributions. This possibility calls for a renewed perspective on the approach to leadership theory in order to avoid revisiting the slow progress and contradicting results of past decades. Thus, whereas recent studies in relation to VBL have looked to offer and identify specific variables that comprise the theory (see Ahn & Ettner, 2014; Hopkins & Scott, 2016), we offer that VBL is a very personal and contextually dependent leadership style and must ask if specific boundary conditions can, or should, ever be fully identified?

Therefore, while there has been much research surrounding various portions of VBL constructs consisting of various leadership theories, along with various understandings and foci in regards to what actually comprises VBL, a clear operational definition as well as how to determine its presence, remains at large. Ahn and Ettner (2014) define values-based leadership “as the moral foundation underlying stewardship decisions and actions of leaders” (p. 977). Drawing from O’Toole (1996), Reilly and Ehlinger (2007) define it as “leadership based on foundational moral principles or values” (p. 246). Others include an ethical component along with the moral considerations in various VBL theories (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Nygaard et al., 2017; Barbera et al., 2020) and there are additional approaches that see VBL as a possible means to bring conflicting values within a diverse workforce into alignment with the values of the organization (Hopkins & Scott, 2016). Moving towards a unifying intersection of corporate HQ and subsidiary values is another similar theme (Smale et. al., 2015), and some see the goal of VBL as the instilling of values in the follower that the leader deems important (Williams et al., 2015).

As values in themselves vary among individuals and can be viewed as being “internalized attitudes about what’s right and wrong, ethical and unethical, moral and immoral” (Yukl, 2010, p. 191), we contend that values-based leadership has less to do with conforming to a particular external world or projecting one’s values onto others, and more to do with matching one’s actions to their own words/values, regardless of what they may be. This aspect of our approach serves to embrace individuality and contextual differences in every person and in every

situation; a view that also allows organizations the opportunity to embrace the diversity within.

While ongoing research has also included an ethical component as part of VBL identification and consideration that compares ethics between the individual and the organization, we offer that this comparison falls outside of VBL and adds further confusion to the discovery of values-based leaders within an organization. In other words, considering that ethics and morality are complimentary, albeit mutually exclusive (Shain & Newport, 2014), we contend that the discussion surrounding whether or not the ethics of leaders and organizations match, is a “fit” issue, just as the consideration of leader values compared to that of an organization is also a “fit” consideration. We further offer that identifying a values-based leader based on their reflection of organizational values does not serve to identify the presence or absence of VBL as once again, this is for a discussion concerning fit. For example, if one operates or behaves apart from their personally espoused values in order to conform to organizational values, the individual could mistakenly be identified as a values-based leader when, in reality, they are not true to themselves. It then follows that the reverse could be true. A leader perceived to not be a values-based leader because their approach or actions do not match the organization, can be mistakenly labeled as not subscribing to values-based leadership, when under our presented approach, they would be a values-based leader if their actions matched their personally espoused values; again, the disconnect with the organization is more of a fit issue.

This position is consistent with Fernandez and Hogan (2002) who stated that “talent and hard work cannot overcome fundamental differences in executives’ individual values and those of the larger group” (p. 27). Building from this, we contend that leader behavior in-line with a corporate ethic does not identify VBL, as the leader can be viewed as hypocritical by direct reports if foregoing their own personal value system in the process. Further, from an individual perspective, the non-congruence of values espoused and lived leads to stress and lack of fulfillment (Peregrym & Wolff, 2013) which brings with it additional work related issues. Thus, we argue that one can be a values-based leader independent of whether or not they subscribe to the corporate ethos or culture and whether or not their ethical conduct is in line with those around them.

Going one step farther, we also contend that the attempts of the past to identify the “one, best, list of values to behold” is a fool’s quest. Again, there is no single best list of values, as VBL should be focused on the consistency between stated values and lived values. This is consistent with the arguments of Antonakis et. al. (2016). There are many historical examples of effective leaders who held less-than-stellar values, but achieved their desired outcomes by steadfastly behaving in a manner that was consistent with those held and stated values.

Another deficiency that remains surrounding VBL is found in attempts to measure or identify VBL within organizations. To date, much of the empirical assessment surrounding the need to understand and develop VBL has been approached utilizing methods of self-report data collection regarding one’s values in relation or comparison to another’s (see Hayibor et al., 2011; Ahn and Ettner, 2014; Peus, et. al., 2012). A few validated instruments/questionnaires can be found that purportedly measure the presence of VBL within an organization and/or among its leaders. Idris (2017) developed and validated such a measure to be used specifically in the context of school leaders in Malaysia. Hendrikz & Engelbrecht (2019) developed and validated a measure to assist in the selection, training, and development of “principled leaders” in South Africa. Unfortunately, in both studies, the researchers relied on participants’ self-perceptions of the degree to which they possessed the desired traits or exhibited the desired behaviors of VBL; which is subject to issues threatening reliability and validity of the findings, such as social desirability and self-report bias. In the Hendrikz study, 58% of the respondents did not even hold management positions, which calls into question whether a majority of the respondents possessed the proper “frame of reference” to even participate. In addition, to date, little research has focused on VBL in lower levels of leadership (Hopkins & Scott, 2016) as much has occurred at the organizational level and revolved around the relationship between the values of a leader and those of the organization. This is not true to the spirit of VBL, which posits that it is applicable to anyone in an organization with direct reports (Kraemer, 2011). Whether a department head, team lead, or unit manager, these individuals all have their own “organizations” for which they are responsible and VBL, when exercised appropriately, can contribute to their success. Additionally, it is viewed that the application

of VBL concepts can be deployed in all workplaces (Della Corte, Del Gaudio, Sepe, & Zamparelli, 2017).

### **Proposed Shift in Focus**

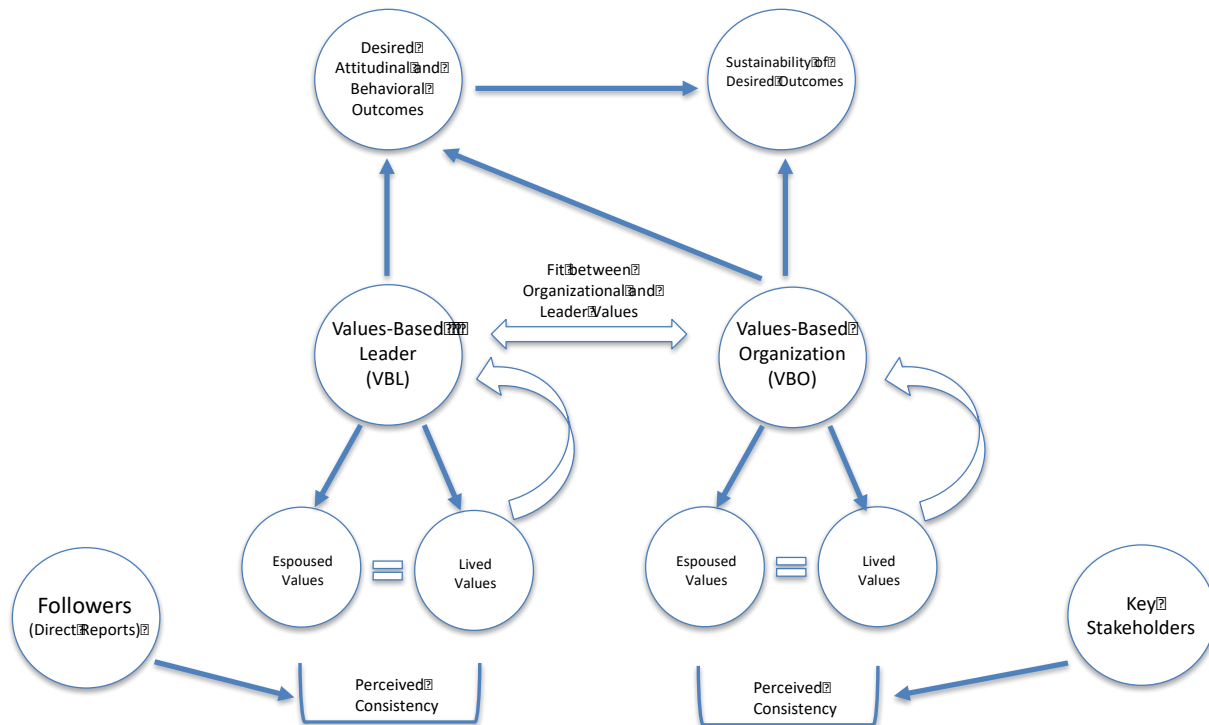
With this understanding, we offer that VBL identification should be analyzed using followers as the respondents; in other words, how does the follower view the leader’s behaviors in relation to the leader’s espoused values? This approach is further supported when it is understood that identification of a values-based leader does not consider group or collective thought processes, rather it considers the consistency between one’s espoused values and those displayed through action (similar to the Exemplary Leadership Practice called “Model The Way” from Kouzes & Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge*, 2017). This further supports why we believe that ethics should not be included as part of VBL considerations as in determining what is ethical or unethical, one could be selective with the unit of comparison and choose dependent upon their own set of values or group affiliations, thus it would be subjective and leadership theory advancement stalls. By contrast, we offer that whether a direct report is or is not in agreement with the values of a leader, they may recognize them as a values-based leader if they perceive the leader’s actions and behaviors matching up to the leader’s espoused values (Garg & Krishnan, 2003). This serves to frame the VBL discussion as a more universal approach to leadership as it does not reflect or rely on external conformity or agreement and is independent of subjective or predetermined ethical considerations. Therefore, in our view, VBL does not have a generalizable ethical component, only individual components that speak back to one being true to oneself.

This leads us to proposing that before any discussion can begin on VBL at the organizational level, it is imperative to first determine if VBL actually exists at the individual leader level. Simply because a leader’s actions and focus match up to the ethical culture of an organization does not mean that VBL is present as, again, we argue that VBL is not about value conformity. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the nature of our holistic view of VBL. To determine if VBL is present, we believe that the focus must be shifted to the assessment of the leaders to determine if their actions are consistent with the values they espouse to their teams. In examining the presence or non-existence of

VBL, we further introduce that it is imperative that the assessment of leader consistency between stated values and behaviors not come from self-report data, but rather from the leader’s followers. More specifically, we argue that to realistically assess whether a leader is practicing VBL one must ask those being “led” what values they would ascribe to the leader based on how they perceive being led. In other words, from the follower’s perspective, are observed leader behaviors consistent with what the leader states is important to them? This leads to the research question that asks: Based on the followers’ perception of leader behavior in relation to how they are being led, are the values followers ascribe to a leader consistent with leader stated

values; indicating the presence of VBL? We contend that this level of measurement will serve to identify values-based leaders and then, once its presence is determined, research should shift to the organizational level of inquiry where the leader/organizational match will more correctly be described as “fit” between the values-based leader and the organization. It follows from this that if the leader’s actions are conformed to that of the organization, but not consistent with their personal values, that while they may operate within the ethic of the organization, that would not be considered VBL.

Figure 1:  
Illustration of Values-Based Leadership (VBL) Within a Values-Based Organization (VBO)



## Examples of the Applicability Surrounding the Proposed VBL Approach

**Enron** - One of the most widely-cited and well-known corporate downfalls was that involving Enron from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. While, externally, the organization was trying to portray itself as a “good corporate citizen,” claiming in their annual 10-K reports that the corporate values were Respect, Communication, Integrity, and Excellence (Enron, 2000) when internally, the values of Greed, Competition, and Machismo were emphasized. The focus placed on the value of Enron stock stretched all the way to the daily posting of it in the corporate HQ elevators and even the bathrooms (McLean & Elkind, 2004).

Using the framework in Figure 1, it was likely that followers perceived consistency in the espoused values and lived values of their leaders, thus resulting in the co-optation of employee attitudes and behaviors. Yet, the same could not be said for the perceptions of other key stakeholders when it comes to the values of the organization. Therefore, the framework proposed would predict that the desired organizational outcomes would not be sustainable; true to form.

**Wells Fargo** - A more recent example, similar to Enron, involves the financial services behemoth, Wells Fargo. In 2015, it was discovered that more than 5,300 employees within the Community Banking division of the firm had opened more than 3 million fraudulent customer accounts (those without the customer’s knowledge and consent). Employees were incented to do so in order to generate additional revenue for the bank from fees associated with those fraudulent accounts. All of this while the Wells Fargo & Company Social Responsibility Report 2015 lists the company’s Five Primary Values as: People as a Competitive Advantage; Ethics; What’s Right for Customers; Diversity & Inclusion; and Leadership (p. 16).

If the proposed model here would have been applied immediately following the 2015 fraudulent account scandal, it would have predicted impending troubles for Wells Fargo via a restricted sustainability of desirable outcomes due to the key stakeholders (in this case, customers) not seeing consistency between espoused and lived values of the organization. This prediction, it turns out, would have been accurate.

As if this was not bad enough, the corporate values of Wells Fargo took another hit recently while the company was trying to rebuild its image. In June, 2020, CEO Charles Scharf said in a memo “there is a very limited pool of black talent to recruit from” in corporate America. The memo became public in September, 2020, and now CEO Scharf is apologizing (Sweet, 2020). There is a profound mismatch between the espoused and lived values at Wells Fargo, especially with regards to Ethics, What’s Right for Customers, and Diversity & Inclusion. [Note: while we argue that Ethics should not be part of VBL, in this instance, it is a stated value of the organization, so we are simply comparing the stated value versus the “lived” value].

**Cerner** - Healthcare information technology services firm Cerner was founded in 1979. In 2001, then-CEO Neal Patterson sent out a memo to about 400 of its managers, which was subsequently leaked online. Patterson, who said he was raised on a farm and was used to hard work, was upset that the parking lots at the corporate HQ were fairly empty prior to 8:00 a.m. and after 5:00 p.m. He threatened to implement time-keeping systems, reduce employee perks, and even terminate those managers who did not increase employee productivity (Wong, 2001). Clearly the values of hard work, dedication, and loyalty were important to the CEO. While “the Street,” a reference to Wall Street, thought the memo to be harsh and a sign

of poor leadership (Cerner stock fell 22% within three days), Patterson did not relent.

Over the past 17 years, the lead author has lived in the general area of Cerner HQ. He has witnessed tremendous growth in the company: with the addition of thousands of employees; numerous new construction of Cerner office buildings on both sides of the Kansas-Missouri state line; and a significant rise in the stock price (well beyond what was lost shortly after the memo went public). To this day, Cerner continues to be thought of as a hard-driving company, where long hours and dedication are still demanded. Applying the framework in Figure 1 supports these outcomes as leaders' lived values are consistent with their espoused values and the same can be said for the organization. Given the great fit between the values of the leaders and the organization as a whole, the success of Cerner is not a surprise. Even though some may consider the shared values to be less-than-positive, it is the consistency between stated and lived values, along with the fit between the values held by leaders and the organization, that matters.

**Chick-Fil-A** - In one of the most difficult employment industries (Quick-Service Restaurants or "Fast Food"); mostly minimum wage; mostly those working their first job or retirees), Chick-Fil-A is winning the service game. In 2019, for the fourth year in a row, they received the highest score in the American Customer Satisfaction Index Annual Survey (Taylor, 2019). In an industry saddled with average annual front-line employee turnover of 107%, Chick-Fil-A is experiencing approximately 60%. Although being one of the smaller players in the industry segment, and operating one fewer day than its competitors (all franchisees are instructed to keep restaurants closed on Sundays), Chick-Fil-A generates the most revenue per restaurant in the entire Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) segment (Milner, 2018).

How do they do it? They have developed and implemented some of the most extensive training programs for both managers and hourly associates, hyper-selective processes for the selection of franchisees/operator; and arduous, continuous support

of the espoused values of the founders and the organization. While the company has taken flack for some of those values that seem ultra-conservative, they have prospered by not veering away from those espoused values. Once again, it is the consistency between the espoused and lived values that matters most. This also supports the position that there is no one set of "right", "correct", or "positive" values that are required in order for VBL or VBO to exist.

## Conclusion

This paper makes the case that, over the last two decades since its inception, there has been little to no advancement in Values-Based Leadership theory and research. Reasons proffered include siloed "streams" of research: employing different operational definitions of VBL; insisting on the existence of and undertaking research efforts to verify a single set of "preferred" or "acceptable" values, especially including an ethical component; focusing on the macro-level issues (e.g., degree to which leaders share the values of the organization); and over-reliance on leader self-report assessment of values held. To overcome the status quo and make progress in the further development of VBL theory, we propose the development of a validated instrument to measure VBL, first by assessing the follower perspective which is then used to compare with a leader's espoused values. This instrument would result in an empirical study which could identify values-based leaders. Once confirmed that VBL is present, studies can then be conducted that look at the fit between an individual VBL and a particular organization. Doing so will also require research to confirm whether an organization is a values-based organization (VBO as we will identify it). This unit of analysis is different, but related to, VBL for the individual. Finally, the question remains as to the validity of an attempt to unify the multiple siloed leadership theories that have values as a component under a single banner.



### About the Authors

Mark D. Fulford, Ph.D. is a Founder/Partner in Acuitas, a Leadership/Organizational Development Consulting Firm. He has devoted his 30+ year career to improving workplaces for the benefit of employees, customers, and organizations. He has held positions in both academia and the private sector. In academia, Fulford has held Management faculty positions at Cornell University, California State University – San Marcos, University of Central Missouri, and Campbellsville University. He has published 25+ articles on his research in the areas of leadership, corporate culture, and organizational development. In the private sector, he has extensive experience in the creation and implementation of a wide array of organizational development initiatives, including the conduct of culture audits within more than 30+ organizations. As a management consultant, he led a successful culture change initiative within a Multinational Corporation (MNC) with more than 250,000 associates. These efforts and the results generated (record-high retention of both operational and management associates, 50% increase in customer experience, 100% increase in quality of leadership as experienced by direct reports, and an annual \$5M+ addition to the bottom line) were recognized when Consulting Magazine named Fulford one of the “Top 10 Up-And-Coming Consultants in the United States”. Fulford received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior/Human Resource Management from the Kelley Graduate School of Business at Indiana University.

Robert A. Coleman, Ph.D. is a Founder/Partner in Acuitas, a Leadership/Organizational Development Consulting Firm. He is a passionate and highly experienced business consultant and entrepreneur with more than 25 years of experiences as an owner, founder, team member, and driven leader. He possesses a high aptitude for critical thinking and analyzing complex business issues with a focus on leadership, management and organizational development concerns in support of sustainable performance, engagement, profitability, and

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