

**QUALITATIVE STUDY**

# Veteran as leader: The lived experience with U.S. Army leader development

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Each year at least \$50 billion is spent globally on leadership development—more than any other training and development program. Managers are concerned about the leadership shortage faced by their organizations and have been aggressive in their attempts to address the issue. These same organization leaders argue that the leadership and teamwork skills possessed by U.S. military veterans are highly desirable. This article presents findings from a phenomenological study that examined how U.S. Army veterans experienced leader development during their term of service. A purposive sample of 10 lower enlisted Army veterans completed a pre-military leadership autobiography and a face-to-face interview. Four primary themes emerged: (a) consistent first Army experiences, (b) observed leadership, (c) performing is essential, and (d) we are all leaders despite not understanding the process. This article contributes to the field of human resource development by discussing the Army leader development program as experienced by veterans and offering nonmilitary organizations a progressive leadership development methodology based on Army training.

**KEYWORDS**

leadership development, military, organizational learning, training and development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Nonmilitary organizations in the United States have established veteran hiring initiatives as part of a national, “veteran-friendly” employer movement. It is nearly impossible to identify an organization that would claim they are not military friendly, but an explanation of the term rarely follows. Perhaps more important is the apparent oversight for the U.S. military's approach to leader development. U.S. Army soldiers participate in an extensive leader development program, and little, if anything, is known about the experience. Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007) argued that leadership development is one of the most important activities undertaken by human resource development

(HRD) professionals, while Madsen (2012) stated that leadership development is now a component of HRD theory, research, and practice. In part because of the training and career advancement opportunities offered, the military excels in the learning process for leader development (Thomas, 2006).

This article outlines research conducted with 10 lower enlisted, post-9/11 U.S. Army veterans about their leader development while serving. References to “the Army” refer exclusively to the U.S. Army and do not apply to other branches of service or armies from other countries. After completing a leadership autobiography and an in-person interview, four themes encompassing the experience with Army leader development were revealed. These themes advance HRD’s understanding of leader development in the U.S. military and offer implementation strategies for nonmilitary organizations. Each of the four themes are discussed and implications for HRD scholars and professionals are presented.

## 2 | SIGNIFICANCE

The development of workforce leaders remains the most sought after of all organizational training initiatives. The growing need for qualified, trained, and prepared leaders in today’s rapidly changing workforce is reflected through rising investments in leadership development programs. Despite \$50 billion being spent annually by employers around the world, only 37% of leaders rated their organization’s leadership development program as “effective”—a percentage that has remained stagnant over the past seven years (Development Dimensions International, 2014). Additionally, less than two-thirds of organization leaders described themselves as highly or very confident in their ability to meet the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) challenges in the workforce, while only 18% of human resource employees claim their leadership is prepared to lead in the current evolving environment (Development Dimensions International, 2014). The disparity between annual spending on leadership development and confidence in organization leadership suggests that training may not be highly effective. While the private workforce admittedly struggles with leadership development, another sector has been credited for their ability to develop leaders.

The U.S. Army veteran’s general leader development experience has not been examined, even while employers, as highlighted in the Harrell and Berglass (2012) study, make claims about their leadership abilities. To clarify, U.S. Army officers and noncommissioned officers in the military have been studied (Bartone, Kelly, & Matthews, 2013; Reed & Craig Bullis, 2009; Useem, 2010), but lower enlisted soldiers have been overlooked, despite also being recognized for their leadership. In fact, the most cited reason by employers to hire veterans and the aspect that makes them most employable is the leadership skills they possess (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kropp, 2013). Harrell and Berglass’s (2012) study found that 68 of 69 participating employers who seek veterans for hire admitted the former service member’s leadership skills directly affected their hiring decisions. As their study revealed, nonmilitary organizations have not distinguished officers and noncommissioned officers from lower enlisted service members, and instead highlight the leadership capacity all veterans have obtained because of service (Harrell & Berglass, 2012).

This study was an examination of the lived leader development experience of Army veterans who did not serve as officers or reach a noncommissioned officer position. Veterans of all ranks are prescribed leaders in the nonmilitary workforce, thus making their initial development worth exploring. The field of HRD is well positioned to examine the military’s approach toward developing leaders with implications for both researchers and practitioners. Leader development in the military has not been scrutinized through research and may offer innovative practices for nonmilitary organizations. Findings from military leader development studies may also enhance practitioners’ understanding of holistic approaches toward leadership development. The study was guided by the following research question: *How do post-9/11 Army veterans describe their lived leader development experience while serving in the U.S. armed forces?*

### 3 | LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The history of leadership development has been brief, with scholars only beginning to examine techniques in recent decades, while the military's approach has yet to be reviewed. Leadership literature has emerged as one of the more studied components of training and development initiatives, though the term itself remains stubbornly abstract. In 1978, Burns argued that leadership was one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth. Fiedler (1996) noted that while the 40 years prior had seen considerable strides in our understanding of leadership, a great deal of moaning remained about a lack of knowing anything worthwhile. A study by Winston and Patterson (2006) revealed over 90 variables of leadership but argued that much discussion about the topic appeared to be "a lot of blind men describing a moving elephant" (p. 7). For the 50 years prior, leadership was generally conceptualized as an individual skill someone possessed (Day, 2000).

The past 10 years have led to increased examination of the distinctions between leader and leadership development, as well as the models and practices related to leadership development for HRD practitioners (Ardichvili & Manderscheid, 2013; Ardichvili, Natt och Dag, & Manderscheid, 2016; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Several HRD authors proposed and presented research approaches for developing leaders. While Shuck and Herd (2012) considered the relationship between employee engagement and leadership development, Day and Harrison (2007); Komives, Longersbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (2006); and Muir (2014) explored the nature of leader identity development. At the same time, Day and Harrison (2007) and Hanson (2013) argued the necessity for considering leadership development as an interconnected process as opposed to an isolated incident. Each viewpoint demonstrates the numerous factors involved in the leadership development process. The U.S. Army recognizes the long-term, continuous progression toward building soldier leadership competencies, as argued by leadership scholars (Day & Harrison, 2007; Hanson, 2013).

While Day and Halpin (2001) considered industry best practices in their technical report on Army leadership, Duffy (2006) discussed the link between veterans and CEOs in the traditional workforce. Both the Army and nonmilitary organizations recognize the value of leadership, though they maintain a distinct approach to leadership development. Whereas leading others is one of many attributes an effective employee in nonmilitary organizations may possess, leadership is a vital aspect of every soldier's development (Wong, Bliese, & McGurk, 2003). The attention toward developing soldier leadership competencies has been mostly overlooked by scholars.

#### 3.1 | Army leader development

Leader development in the U.S. Army is at the core of soldier training. Rather than offer leadership training to select high-potential new leaders or underperforming soldiers, the Army embeds leader development into the initial as well as ongoing training regimen for service members. An Army leader is anyone who, by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility, inspires and influences people to accomplish organizational goals (Department of the Army, 2006, 2012b; Michelson, 2013). Throughout training, soldiers are challenged to develop their leadership skills (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014; Wong et al., 2003). Though Army training has evolved, all soldiers are provided a clear prescription for how they are expected to behave while wearing the uniform (Wong et al., 2003). In addition, the Army has and continues to emphasize the need to develop soldiers into leaders capable of handling complex, difficult, and often stressful missions—similar qualities of effective leaders in today's nonmilitary workforce.

The Army invests heavily in leader development as part of soldier training. Leader development is a deliberate, continuous, sequential, and progressive process grounded in the Army's values (Department of the Army, 2015). Leader development involves recruiting, accessing, developing, assigning, promoting, and retaining leaders, while challenging them with greater responsibility (Department of the Army, 2012a). Soldiers are continuously developed to be more competent, be experts within their profession, and be stronger leaders through all stages of their term of service (Department of the Army, 2006, 2012a). The Department of the Army (2012b) argued that unit training and leader development are inextricably linked. Good training supports leader development, while good leaders

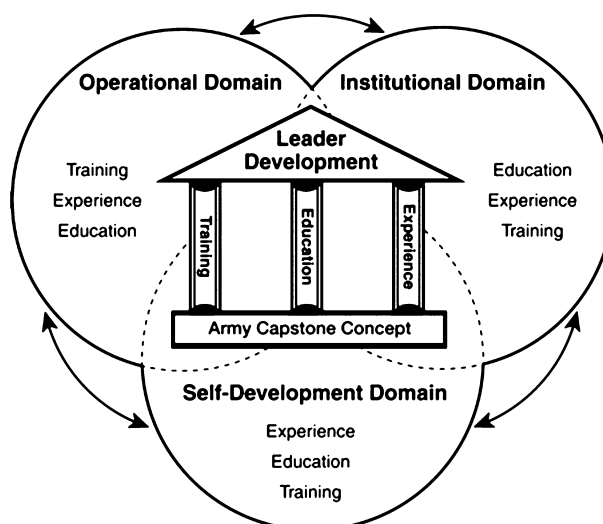
develop strong training (Department of the Army, 2012b). The relationship between leadership and training allows the U.S. Army to incorporate leader development throughout the soldier's service time. This continuous investment in leader development may help explain why civilians often identify veterans as being strong leaders (Harrell & Berglass, 2012).

The Army identifies three training domains within their leader development program (see Figure 1). The approach assumes mid- and long-term commitments to improve leader qualities by merging the influences of factors including military education, self-study, experiences, feedback, reflection, and coaching (Moilanen & Craig, 2000). The institutional domain incorporates the training offered by any of the Army's institutional training or education centers that help soldiers learn how to perform tasks—most often occurring in the classroom (Department of the Army, 2012b, 2014). The second domain, operational, is less directed and more interactive. The operational domain is where leaders undergo the bulk of their development (Department of the Army, 2013). Upon learning a new skill, soldiers are empowered to perform their jobs within a structured learning environment (Department of the Army, 2012b). The operational domain is an effective method of development and builds off what has been learned in the classroom (Department of the Army, 2012b). Practical application of training through the institutional domain provides leaders an opportunity to build confidence and further develop leadership competencies (Moilanen & Craig, 2000).

The final domain of the Army leader development model is self-development. Self-development constitutes any educational training in which a soldier participates for the purpose of developing oneself without being required to do so (Department of the Army, 2012b). One year later, the Department of the Army (2013) added structured self-development as mandatory in learning modules to meet outlined objectives. The Army recognizes that lifelong learning in schools or operational units will not meet everyone's needs (Department of the Army, 2014) and thus is the responsibility of the individual (Department of the Army, 2012b).

#### 4 | METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study sought to understand Army veterans' leader development experience while serving in the armed forces. Phenomenological studies are interested in the way people make sense of their thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and social activity from past experiences (Klenke, 2008). Whereas a narrative study reports the life



**FIGURE 1** Army leader development model

of a single individual, a phenomenological study explores and describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is essentially the study of past experiences as lived through individuals (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989), and findings from these types of studies are structured to present commonalities among participants related to a particular experience or concept (Creswell, 2007). The Army leader development program is outlined through doctrine produced by the organization and helped guide this study's data collection and analysis.

Leader development is a fundamental aspect of Army training, and the experiences of Army officers and noncommissioned officers have been examined. However, the leader development program, as experienced by lower enlisted soldiers prior to moving into a formalized leadership role, has largely been ignored. Interviews with post-9/11 Army veterans who completed their enlistment prior to attaining the rank of sergeant allowed participants to share their experiences with Army leaders and their leader development for this research study.

## 4.1 | Conceptual framework

Yeager and Callahan's (2016) model of identity development for leaders and the Army's leader development model (Department of the Army, 2012b) contributed the study's conceptual framework. Service members participate in comprehensive training designed to develop leadership attributes and competencies over the duration of a soldier's term of service (Department of the Army, 2012b, 2014). The process is an integrated, sequential program that takes place in schools, the field, and civilian-led education institutions (Department of the Army, 2014). Over the duration of enlistment, soldiers are exposed to many leaders and countless leadership opportunities. Upon transitioning out of the Army, soldiers bring key leadership attributes to the nonmilitary workforce.

## 4.2 | Model of identity development for leaders

The model of identity development for leaders identifies the role authority figures, peers, and other organizational members play in leader development, while at the same time identifying the significance of learning to lead from example and leading others by example (Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Leader development occurs over a lifetime as opposed to a singular training or development experience (Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Yeager and Callahan's (2016) model supports this investigation by acknowledging that many influences may impact soldier leader development and appears to build off Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The Army expects leaders to lead by example and serve as constant role models who maintain Army standards and provide examples of effectiveness through their actions (Department of the Army, 2012a). After observing and processing, soldiers model behaviors that generated positive responses and avoid ineffective tactics.

## 4.3 | Participation and data collection

Participating veterans met the following criteria: enlisted after 2001; completed basic training, military occupational specialty school, and one-year of active-duty service; enlisted within five years of graduating high school and completed service obligation within five years of participating in the study; attained a rank no higher than sergeant and never participated in the warrior leadership course; and received an honorable discharge. The criteria ensured focus on the identity development of lower enlisted soldiers who had few other professional training experiences that may have impacted their leadership perceptions. This purposive sample of 10 post-9/11 veterans also allowed for five of the Army's 10 job categories to be represented. After coding and analyzing the data from the first 10 participating veterans, the researcher determined a point had been reached where no new information was anticipated to justify the need for additional participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Two data collection methods were used for this study—participant leadership autobiographies and in-person interviews. The two methods were used to gain information about related but different phenomena (Maxwell,

2013). Qualitative research attempts to identify the why, how, and what is occurring (Yin, 2002). Through using autobiographies and interviews, the researcher was able to understand the phenomenon as experienced by participants and distinguish shared patterns of behavior and beliefs (Horvat, 2013). The 20-question autobiography was completed using a Qualtrics survey provided through e-mail and asked participants about their leadership experiences prior to serving in the Army. This technique was selected after considering Glesne's (2011) data collection recommendations—can the necessary data be collected? Can the data contribute to different perspectives on the issue? And does the technique make good use of time available? The online autobiography allowed participants to reflect more deeply on their prior leadership experiences and influences, while also enabling participants to complete the survey when time permitted (Klenke, 2008). The autobiography asked questions related to the influence of *family and friends on leadership perspectives, perceived prior leadership experiences, and individual characteristics upon enlistment*. Though not exhaustive, understanding the perceived influences of each participant prior to enlistment allowed the researcher to better understand the veterans' backgrounds as they related to leadership. Autobiography responses were reviewed and analyzed prior to beginning the interviews.

Interviews were semistructured and began with 28 prewritten questions surrounding the following themes: initial leadership exposure, influential leaders, leadership experiences, Army leader development domains, and contributions on leadership today. As previously noted, the study intended to understand how veterans experienced Army leader development. The themes allowed participants to define when their leader development began, discuss influences on their leader development during service, and assess how—if at all—the Army contributed to their development as leaders. The Army's leader development program contributed to the interview questions, as Army leaders, soldier leadership roles, and training domains were all addressed. Interviews began after a brief discussion with each participant about the study's purpose; consent to participate; and review of the institutional, operational, and self-development domains. Interviews lasted 37 to 76 minutes and averaged 51 minutes per participant. Interviews are one of the most widely used techniques for conducting a systematic social inquiry, including leadership research (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). "Qualitative interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world of informants by asking them to talk about their lives" (Klenke, 2008, p. 120). Upon completion of both the leadership autobiographies and interviews, the manuscripts were coded and analyzed.

#### 4.4 | Data analysis

The analysis integrated data from both the leadership autobiographies and in-person interviews. After the first four transcriptions were completed, the researcher scrutinized each manuscript while striving to allow participant voices to come through. Leadership autobiographies were inspected for word repetitions, emerging themes, distinct categories, and statements of interest to capture data that seemed important or provided new insights (Maxwell, 2013). Using NVivo 9 Software, the initial round of inspection helped establish a general understanding of the participant's leader development experience without adding codes or notes. A second reading of each transcript allowed the researcher to begin identifying keywords, phrases, and influences on the veteran's leader development. Third and fourth read-throughs of the four initial transcriptions led to the development of a 38-code dictionary. The remaining autobiographies and interviews were subsequently coded using the coding dictionary.

A pre-military leadership development matrix was created and presents data collected from the study's participants (Table 1). The pre-military leadership development matrix was formed using data provided from the online leadership autobiographies, and pseudonyms were created for each participant. The information was scrutinized for emerging themes and prospective relationships.

Once coded, the transcripts were examined for themes related to Army leader development. Creswell (2007) proposed that data analysis consist of organizing, then reducing data into themes through condensing codes, and presenting the data in tables or discussions. Once coding was nearly finalized, a second process of grouping codes into categories began, as part of organizing and making sense of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Seidman, 1998). Codes chosen from the data were used to summarize or reduce information into distinct chunks or segments

**TABLE 1** Pre-military leadership development matrix

Pseudonym	Believe a leader pre-military?	Pre-military LD	Siblings	Enlistment age	Year of enlistment	Active-duty Years	Time deployed	Military occupation specialty (MOS)	Highest rank attained	Job category
Dennis	Yes	JROTC	5+	19-20	2009	4	1 year	11B	Corporal	Combat
Chris	No	None	2	19-20	2009	3	1 year	11B	Specialist	Combat
Andrea	Yes	None	2	19-20	2011	3	None	92R	Specialist	Intel & Combat
Rachel	No	None	5+	19-20	2010	1	None	42A	PV2	Admin Support
Mike	No	None	1	21+	2009	3	11 months	11B	Specialist	Combat
Brian	No	None	2	19-20	2002	9	3 years	91B	Specialist	Legal & Law
Mark	Yes/No	None	1	21+	2006	6	27 months	13B	Sergeant	Combat
Jan	Yes	None	2	19-20	2006	4	None	91B	Specialist	Mechanic
Carol	No	None	1	19-20	2011	4	None	35F	Sergeant	Intel & Combat
Leo	Yes	Youth NAACP	5+	21+	2008	4	1 year	74D	Corporal	Intel & Combat

**TABLE 2** Emergent Themes from Coding Dictionary

Codes	Categories	Themes
Diverse backgrounds	<i>Starting point</i>	<b><i>Consistent first Army experiences</i></b>
Siblings		
Age		
Year of enlistment		
Family influence		
Friends influence		
Work influence		
Additional influences		
Pre-military leader		
Pre-military leadership		
Drill sergeants	<i>Influential individuals</i>	
Tough great leadership		
Other influential leaders		
Direct	<i>Observations</i>	
Organizational		<b><i>Observed leadership</i></b>
Strategic		
Favoritism		
Fear		
Learn leadership jobs		
Worst army leader		
Performing	<i>Performing as leaders</i>	
Classroom a waste		
Institutional		<b><i>Performing is essential</i></b>
Failing		
Never great leader		
Self-development		
Army LD feedback	<i>Army LD feedback</i>	
Unclear		
Contribution		
Leading civilians		
transition		
KSAs same	<i>KSAs, attitudes, and beliefs</i>	
Protecting		<b><i>We are leaders</i></b>
Respect		
Physical fitness		
Standards		
Mission		
Understand why tough or yelling		

(Saldana, 2013). Through the process, six categories were determined: starting point; Army LD feedback; influential individuals; observations; performing as leaders; and knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs), attitudes, and beliefs. Again, the researcher scrutinized the data and asked, "What is the story?" Table 2 outlines the progression from coding dictionary to four emergent themes.



## 4.5 | Data quality control

Data quality control was emphasized throughout the research. Qualitative research involves collecting and interpreting others' meaning making, and the primary instrument for data collection and analysis is the researcher (Punch, 2006). Based on quality control recommendations by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher conducted member checks, asked colleagues to review the findings, and provided an audit trail to decrease threats to the study's trustworthiness. Member checks took place after all interviews and autobiographies were analyzed. All participants were invited to a one-hour meeting to review the study's findings. During member checks with five of the participants, the researcher presented each finding individually and discussed how they were developed. Participants were invited to provide feedback and additional insight to ensure that their voices were heard, verify fair representation of data, and increase credibility (Anderson, 2017; Choi & Roulston, 2015). Each of the four findings were confirmed, with two participants noting that the themes were "pretty obvious." To ensure credibility, four colleagues with qualitative research backgrounds were also presented with the data, coding dictionary, and subsequent findings.

Researcher positionality was also considered as part of study credibility. Babbie (1979) highlighted that there are no truly objective research studies, as researchers have an expectation from the findings. Though the process of leader development was unclear, the researcher, through previous observation and discussion, anticipated that participants would present themselves as leaders after having served. At the time of data collection, the researcher served as director of a veteran's resource center and was relatively well known in the local veteran community. The power distance afforded the researcher access to campus veterans. The researcher is also a combat veteran and has presented at national conferences about veteran transition and employment issues.

## 5 | FINDINGS

After coding and categorizing data, four themes emerged. This section presents four primary findings from the study: *consistent first Army experiences*, *observed leadership*, *performing is essential*, and *we are leaders despite not understanding the process*. The findings highlight how veterans experienced leader development during their service.

### 5.1 | Theme 1: Consistent first Army experiences

The first theme that emerged was related to the veterans' first exposure to Army leader development regardless of their experiences or leadership beliefs prior to enlisting. Eight of the 10 participants stated that they did not participate in a leadership development program before enlisting even though all 10 were employed at least once prior to their enlistment. At the same time, four participants believed they were leaders before enlisting, while seven admitted to being below average students in high school. Brian contributed this from his pre-military leadership autobiography, "as a DM [Dungeon Master] for my AD&D [Dungeons and Dragons] experiences I would plan adventures for my group and keep the group from going off-track." Jan added, "It was actually few and far between because there weren't a lot of situations which allowed me to take a leadership position."

While two other veterans shared a similarly limited leadership background, four others admitted to having zero experience. Carol provided from her autobiography, "No, I did not consider myself a leader. I was a very shy, introverted person who was often afraid to stand up for the things I believed in and lacked the initiative to take charge." Rachel added from her interview:

I didn't have much of an idea of what I was doing with my own life. There was no way I could lead others. I wasn't leading anyone. I led a lot of shenanigans. The whole room would kind of light when I walked in, made everyone laugh, but I wasn't going anywhere.

Additional participant comments about pre-military leadership included statements of being forced to be leaders, not at all a leader, was a leader by example, and received little instruction for how to lead. The diversity in personal prior leadership experiences and beliefs reflected the range family and friends played in the participants' leadership development before enlisting. Though participant backgrounds varied greatly, they shared a similar introductory experience with Army leader development.

When asked to describe their first leadership experience while serving, eight veterans referenced their time in basic training. Mark described, "Everyone gets put into a squad leader or a platoon sergeant role in basic training; everyone gets cycled through it, and it's just part of the gig." Andrea contributed:

I would say it was through basic training because that's where you could earn your stripes with your peers; it was how you would take things said to you and different types of punishments that are given. I guess I can go off of when I got promoted in basic training. I guess you can say it would probably be my first official feeling as a leader, so I guess that would probably feel the first time I was acting as a leader because I was the only female that got promoted and then I was 1 of 3 over a little over 100 of us, 1 of 3 or 4, but I was the only female that got promoted in basic training.

These stories demonstrate the impact basic training had on soldiers, even though the primary purpose of boot camp is to prepare civilians to be soldiers. At the same time, seven participants, when asked about their first Army leader, spoke about drill sergeants. Carol noted:

My first Army leader was my drill instructor in basic, and I feel like that's the same for everyone though. But I looked up to her specifically as being a leader because I know a lot of the drill sergeants put her down because they didn't like her, but she didn't care what the other people thought of her. She still continued to do her job. She was a very headstrong woman and I admire that because I hadn't had a lot of strong female roles in my life. ... She is the best Army leader I have been around.

Dennis detailed a particular experience during basic training:

Probably some time when we were getting jacked up within the first couple days. I have a couple different memories of getting [f'ed] up but let's say we had to go get some stones or some rocks, something like that and people were coming back with these little pebbles, and I was like, "Dog, don't do that, we're going to have to get screwed up and get rocks like the size of this [f'ing] house. Go get a real rock, suck it up.

This diverse group of individuals who enlisted in the Army coming from broad backgrounds and influences experienced their first Army leader development early and in a consistent manner. Similarly, the drill sergeants, who often are not well liked and challenge soldiers to perform at a very high level, were recognized as the first Army leader these veterans were exposed to. Mark commented:

The first leader I seen was the drill sergeant and that was interesting. Completely in your face, no [bull]. Being out of the Army now, I understand why they did that, I understand the breakdown process to build you back up. At the time I didn't know what the [f] was going on. Obviously, I just was, wow, why is this guy screaming at me so much for?

Chris described:

I probably say my first leader was, kind of a drill sergeant. Drill Sergeant Bob, and I hated this guy so much ... the meanest mother I've ever met, and towards the end, I'm still thinking I hate this guy. ...

And the last time we go out, the last time we get together to do the parade, he's like, "Good luck, you guys. Wish you luck. Bye." That was pretty much it and I'm like, "I still hate you." ... Once I got to my unit, that's when I started realizing, whoa, there's a reason this guy pushed us so hard. Why he made our lives such a living hell every day. And it made me really appreciate it, made me a stronger individual, pushed me where I never thought I could even go. And it kind of made me grow up. He pushed me and pushed me. I mean indirectly, he maybe only talked to me once but he had a huge impact on my life, and think, to go beyond that a little bit, he actually was killed in Afghanistan in 2011, and he was actually ... he died jumping on top of soldiers while they were getting mortared.

Veterans who participated in this study identified exposure to and performing as leaders in basic training as a significant contributor to their Army leader development experience. As the interviews continued, the veterans continued to speak about the many other leaders they would interact with over the course of their service.

## 5.2 | Theme 2: Observed leadership

The second theme revealed that observing leadership was an important influence in the veterans' leader development. The Army does not include observing leaders as a component of their leader development model; however, the veterans detailed their experiences, with individual leaders throughout the interviews suggesting a lasting impact. Each of the 10 participating veterans spoke directly and indirectly about observing leaders from all ranks and levels of effectiveness. Brian described:

I think the Army has contributed to me mostly through how I see, how I've observed others. Exactly how they do their development with the teaching below and above and everything, so as I learned from my leader, my multiple leaders, you kind of get a large sampling of how some leaders act and you begin to pick and choose those parts on what you want to be a leader yourself and hopefully show or become a good leader. Where others are choosing some of the tactics you do compared to deciding not to be like you. So I think they've put me into good teams to where I was able to draw from the leaders I've had.

Chris added:

Watching my leaders, the way they acted, the way they did everything. I think that's where you learn a lot. I mean, you're supposed to E5 [sergeant], supposed to know their stuff. That's where institutional comes from, but everyone's different so you learn all these different types of leadership by different people. Like my team leader, one of my first, he was way out there. He was a yeller. But you were to get with him one-on-one, just he was there for you, but on the outside, he would scream at everybody; smoke everybody all the time but you get one-on-one, a good guy who just did whatever it took to help you succeed.

Throughout the interviews, participants identified distinctions between effective and ineffective leaders. Carol explained:

The first person that I looked at ... she was a good leader, so instead of taking all of the bad things from a bad leader and not doing those things, I looked at all the things she did and used that to develop my leadership skills.

Andrea described her worst Army leader:

I wouldn't compare them. The worst Army leader, he just had no comparison, he was just horrible. He was really goofy and really unrealistic and would get upset over petty things, like extremely upset, to the point where we're doing pushups for literally no reason, but yet serious things were just, that was fine. I couldn't compare them. It would probably be offensive.

All 10 participants readily identified their worst leader and shared detailed accounts supporting their beliefs. The actions of both well-liked and ineffective leaders were recalled with ease as most of the participants spoke to mirroring actions of their top Army leaders. Additionally, the veterans highlighted their experience being empowered to lead throughout military service.

### 5.3 | Theme 3: Performing is essential

Each of the veterans attributed their leadership abilities to performing as one while serving. The Army's leader development program was not clear for the participants, but, as described in Army doctrine, leader development is primarily accomplished through empowering soldiers to lead and accepting that mistakes are part of the learning process (Department of the Army, 2012a). In those situations, the veterans described taking ownership, protecting subordinates, and feeling a sense of responsibility. Carol offered:

I guess it must have been when I did my first exercise with the Army, which was when I was still a private. I was in charge of one of the shifts, or I was second in charge, but I guess that's where I had my first opportunity to lead other people. I noticed I was not afraid to do things and I knew what I was doing, so I was just going above and beyond where in the past I never would have done that. I felt confident, and that is something prior to the Army I never felt.

Brian provided:

I would say it's almost trial by fire sometimes. You get promoted, you get your five [E5], and then you're thrown into a team leader position right away whether ... they're ready for it ... I think that it works well as in an E1 [Private], E2 [Private E2], wherever you kind of end up learning everybody else's job at the time so you, if your leader goes down, you're able to take that role and get the mission done still.

Unlike performing as a leader, the classroom and, more generally, the institutional domain was considered insignificant in their development. The classroom was ultimately described as a "waste of time" by seven participants. Though the institutional domain is one of the three pillars in the Army leader development model, participating veterans were adamant that their classroom time was not beneficial. Mike noted that he had "never known a single person in the Army that benefitted from the in-the-classroom type stuff." Chris added, "I'm not really sure it has, at least not yet. I mean I did learn from my NCOs over me, but I mean besides just knowing the rank structure, in my opinion, it hasn't really done anything." Over the course of the 10 interviews, the word *death* was used eight times—six times related to veterans' experience in the classroom, and "death by PowerPoint" was referenced five times.

Jan was particularly harsh on her classroom experience:

Death by PowerPoint. That is honestly what they did the most. All of the classes we had to take on like sexual assault and all of those types of classes, it was all PowerPoint and it was awful. Everybody had a hard time not falling asleep. And it was always two hours long. It was so bad. That's how I would describe that. It has made me realize that nobody likes PowerPoints and that if I'm ever giving training, do not do PowerPoints. I'm sure you've probably gotten that answer a lot, which is really sad. That's how it has contributed to me as a leader.

The concern these veterans demonstrated for their time in the classroom offers insight into an underperforming pillar in the Army's leader development model. The operational domain clearly is influential, though the institutional (i.e., sitting and listening training component of the Army) was not offering a similar contribution. Even while recognizing that all soldiers and people learn differently, the participants claimed that their own leader style did not match the classroom instruction strategy.

Self-development is the third domain presented in the Army leader development model. Seven of the study participants did not attribute self-development as an influence on their Army leader development. The three participants who believed self-development was impactful shared respective experiences in college, through reading books and reviewing field manuals. Mark was the most outspoken against the impact of self-development on his leader development, claiming, "it [self-development] didn't at all, not a bit." He continued:

You live and breathe that s\*\*\* every day, so your free time is your free time. ... A lot of guys were like [f] that, I'm not doing that. That's how I feel like a lot of younger enlisted guys were, and then once you get upper enlisted, they got so much other s\*\*\* going on. There is always something else going on, so I feel like the self-development isn't as crucial.

Chris added:

Yeah, for me personally, it's through the actual training; it's going out and doing things and me just as a person looking at how I feel about something and applying it to helping my soldiers and helping myself, and helping the mission, helping others.

Though participating veterans did not utilize self-development during their service, eight considered it an important part of leader development. Comments about self-reflection, personal assessment, and "watch and learn" were suggested as types of self-development by participants. The comments expand upon the Army's definition, which is more exclusive to actual training offered, for example, through a college or training center.

#### 5.4 | Theme 4: We are all leaders despite not understanding the process

The veterans who participated in this study revealed that they are leaders today because of their service. By observing leadership and performing as leaders early and throughout their service, the participants believed they were prepared to lead both other soldiers and civilians. While half were forthcoming about not currently holding a formal leadership role, each was confident in their ability to lead when called upon. Remarkably, the participating veterans struggled to articulate the Army leader development program. Participant responses included long pauses, inquiries about what the question meant, and even frustration from one veteran who believed he had already addressed the topic. As Mike noted, "These questions are a little complicated. Like, apparently, I'm not answering correctly because you keep asking different ways. Let's see. Component with leaders...the leaders did just fine I guess." Andrea suggested the Army's leader development program was "rough."

Chris' belief about Army leader development was similarly cloudy:

I really don't know how I would explain the overall Army's approach, I could just only talk about my own personal experience but, from what I've seen, it's sometimes still a good ole boys club. It's helping out your friends and stuff like that even though those friends shouldn't be where they're supposed to be. Some of them turn out to be good, but just because you like someone doesn't mean they should be in some of those positions.

Dennis went as far as stating, "They suck at it. It's amazing that the Army is the way it is ... it's amazing that our Army is as powerful as it is because they suck at leader development."

Though participants were unable to describe the leader development program, each participant claimed they were leaders today as a result of their service. The beliefs were subsequently supported through discussions about the impact military service has had on their lives as well as the role they often play in group activities. Seven of the 10 described particular instances they felt comfortable leading in. Mark noted that he is “still pretty shy and not outgoing until I get to know someone, but definitely it's made me progress and be willing to take that extra step, extra leap to develop myself and kind of take that extra step forward and take charge of stuff in everything so far lately.”

Jan echoed:

In my classes I do a lot of the talking, especially in the first few when people don't really want to talk. I've been told that I make people very comfortable and that's a good quality to have. ... I think if given the opportunity, I could become a great leader.

Chris encapsulated most of the participant's beliefs:

I want to say excellent because even though I've really trashed it kind of a lot, it really does teach you how to, I guess this sounds a little sexist but it teaches you to “man up.” It makes you more assertive, teaches you to speak up, take control, take control of the people around you to accomplish something. I mean even though I'm kind of back tracking again, I've been trashing it a little bit about the way it is, but all those guys out there [points to a veteran's social lounge] could easily be a leader of anything. Any of'em.

Participants repeatedly discussed their confidence in leading others, ability to make decisions, and leadership qualities possessed. The findings were consistent regardless of age, sex, time in service, and job. The diverse sample and similar responses suggest a consistent leader development approach, regardless of background or military occupation.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The identified themes highlight an embedded leader development program within the Army. Soldiers, regardless of their background prior to enlisting, are treated in a similar manner. Service members arrive to basic training in cattle trucks and are exposed to drill sergeants who challenge them both mentally and physically. The participating veterans spoke heavily about the influence basic training played on their development. The majority discussed having served in a leadership role during boot camp as their first time feeling like a leader. Throughout military service, the veterans identified two key leader development influences: observing leadership and performing as leaders. As the veterans proceeded through basic training and their military careers, they spoke about the impact observing leaders played on their own development.

Each of the participating veterans described their best and worst Army leaders with little difficulty, often attributing their leadership style today to the impact military leaders had on their development. Like leaders in nonmilitary organizations, many leadership qualities were discussed by the participants and all attributed a portion of their leader development to those they observed. Drill sergeants, section chiefs, and platoon sergeants all played a role in leader development, regardless of whether the leader was identified as “good” or “bad.” This finding was consistent with Yeager and Callahan's (2016) research on the impact of observed leadership. Observation of other leaders over the course of their career enabled the veterans to see, feel, and critique effective leadership methods. Kempster (2009) noted the relationship social structures play in shaping leadership, while Yeager and Callahan (2016) added that as leaders learn to perform behaviors, their actions are reinforced through interactions with others. The military is hierarchical, meaning many soldiers find themselves in a leadership position. Through this structure, service members are constantly exposed to variations of leadership.

The worst leaders shared traits common to ineffective leaders in the traditional workforce. Through their research, McCall and Lombardo (1983) identified the following traits of ineffective leaders: intimidating and bullying subordinates, laziness, an inability to think critically, and insufficient management skills. Five years later, incompetent leaders demonstrated an inability to build a cohesive team; were overtly emotional, demanding, unsupportive, and insensitive; and maintained poor relations with staff (Lombardo, Ruderman, & McCauley, 1988). Each of these traits and attributes were discussed during the interview process, suggesting that veterans and nonveterans alike share similar beliefs about ineffective leaders.

The Army's admission that the operational domain (performing) is the primary means for leader development was supported in the findings. While the classroom was part of training and self-development, though underutilized, was deemed important, the resounding theme surrounded performing as a leader. As described by Ford and Fottler (1995), empowering leadership involves a transfer of power from top management to workers, providing opportunities to take initiative and make decisions. Leaders develop soldiers' capacity by matching leadership abilities with appropriate growth opportunities at the right place and at the right time (Department of the Army, 2013). Being a leader, regardless of the amount of responsibility, provided an opportunity to grow confidence and deepen understanding of effective leadership practices. This holistic approach ensures long-term health of the organization (Department of the Army, 2013).

Finally, each of the 10 participating veterans in the study described themselves as stronger leaders today because of their military service. Of the four participants who believed they were leaders prior to enlisting, each attributed military service as the most impactful aspect of their leadership development to date. Still, the veterans struggled to explain the Army leader development program. Comments such as "rough," "nonexistent," and "a s\*\*\* show" highlighted the issue these former service members held toward Army leader development. This revelation suggests that the Army does little to involve and describe to soldiers the importance of developing their leadership abilities through the current model. At the same time, the Army's leader development program contributed toward perceived leadership competency improvements.

## 6.1 | Implications

This study offers insight into the leader development experience of lower enlisted Army service members. The analysis contributes to the limited understanding HRD scholars and practitioners have related to military training—specifically, Army leader development as it relates to lower enlisted service members. Findings from the study suggest an integrated leadership development model for all service members, beyond those who solely fill a formal leadership position and lead to a lasting impact for employees in nonmilitary organizations. The Army's leader development program may be a model for integrated leader development of all employees in nonmilitary organizations. A review of the implications is offered below.

## 6.2 | Leadership development of new employees

The Army's approach to leader development is consistent for all new soldiers, regardless of the enlistee's background. The pre-military leader development autobiographies revealed numerous differences between participants, though similar responses were shared regarding first experiences with Army leader development. Professionals in HRD may benefit from adding a leadership development component to their new employee orientation programs. Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) argued that it can take 10 years or more for employees to develop expert competence, as leadership is inherently an interpersonal and relational phenomenon. While rare for new employees to lead exercises during orientation in nonmilitary organizations, basic training served as an introduction to the long-term investment made by the Army toward developing soldier leadership competencies. An integrated leader development program started early in an employee's tenure may be beneficial for today's employers already concerned about their leadership pipeline. Empowering employees to fill a leadership role early would contribute toward

shortening the time required to develop a strong pipeline of organizational leaders, as well as demonstrate commitment to leadership development as part of an organization's culture.

### 6.3 | Impact of observing leadership

Army leaders had a long-term impact on the veterans' beliefs about leadership. The impact of observing leaders, combined with the importance of serving in leadership roles, supports Yeager and Callahan's (2016) proposed model of leader identity development. The veterans spoke passionately about the impact of ineffective leaders on their leader development. Regardless of whether the veteran was discussing officers or noncommissioned officers, the participants shared memories about their former leaders that continue to resonate today. Whether discussing actions, decisions, or comments, each of the participants revealed what they would never do as a leader because of what they had seen ineffective leaders do.

Practitioners in the HRD community may benefit from an increased understanding of how ineffective leaders impact the long-term financial health, employee development, and reputation of an organization. The ineffective leaders discussed in this study influenced how these veterans felt about the Army's leader development program and the Army's interest in taking care of its soldiers. The same long-term effects are possible in nonmilitary organizations but additional research is needed.

### 6.4 | Embedded leadership development

The study's fourth theme may be most impactful for HRD scholars and practitioners, as it signifies that leader development may be possible without participant knowledge. Each of the research participants believed they were leaders after having served in the military but were unable to explain the Army's leader development program. Leader development began early in the veterans' enlistment and continued throughout their service, though the process was very difficult to describe. In fact, the intentional development of soldier leader competencies was so deeply engrained in training that the veterans did not notice they were participating. The HRD community has not examined the impact of embedded leader development in daily training and operations in the nonmilitary workforce. Is it possible for leader development to be so deeply engrained in an organization's culture that employees are not aware they are participating? The Army has demonstrated effective leader development without removing soldiers from their daily jobs. Nonmilitary organizations may benefit from establishing a culture where leader development is part of the daily job function, as opposed to distinguishable from typical work assignments.

### 6.5 | Limitations

Findings should not be generalized, as the study consisted of only 10 Army veterans who met strict participation criteria. Additionally, these findings may be difficult to translate to nonmilitary organizations. The Army's core function is unique from for-profit organizations, as is the training. Whereas participants understood yelling and physical punishment were part of their necessary training, employees in the nonmilitary workforce would likely have a different response. Service members also undergo extensive training and retraining, where leader development can more readily be incorporated—a potential issue for employees required to perform their job function daily as opposed to continue training.

At the time of the study, the researcher served as director of a campus veteran's resource center. Many of the participants knew the researcher, and all understood the study was about their Army leader development experience. Thus, participants may have admitted to believing they are leaders to appease the researcher. To address, participants were notified prior to beginning the study that there were no correct answers and that their beliefs about the Army would not be considered "good" or "bad." In addition, the researcher informed participants that the Army's



leader development process was not the focus of the study; instead, the intent was to understand how each participant experienced Army leader development during their service.

## 6.6 | Future research

Findings from the study serve as a baseline for new research in HRD. Participants were not surprised by the findings, despite significant differences in demographics, Army job duty, active-duty time, or number of deployments. Comparable leader development experiences may result with service members from other branches, but research is necessary prior to generalizing findings. The Army's use of an integrated leader development training model offers HRD scholars an opportunity to examine the extended impact of long-term exposure to leadership development. Similar research on the effect leadership development has for new employees may provide insight regarding effective implementation of leadership development early in an employee's career.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the advancement of HRD in several ways—first by exploring leader development in a new employment sector. The U.S. Army is widely regarded as one of the most powerful and proficient training organizations in the world, yet few civilians know anything about military service (Bender, 2014; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, n.d.). Findings revealed the significant impact that leaders, regardless of effectiveness, had on the former soldiers' leader development. As Yukl (1989) noted, it is critical we understand how leadership behaviors affect other leaders, followers, and the broader organization.

Three themes from this research—consistent first Army experiences, observed leadership, and performing is essential—outlined a natural, embedded leader development program for veterans from enlistment to completion of military service. Though no single program will fit all learners, the need remains for a complete, coherent model of leadership development (Cox, Pearce, & Sims, 2003; Pearce, 2007). Participants in the study also admitted to not understanding the Army's leader development program components, yet each felt like leaders after service. If the largest branch of the U.S. military can develop leadership competencies throughout a soldier's enlistment, it may be possible to entrench similar initiatives in the nonmilitary workforce. By increasing the HRD community's understanding about various leader development programs, scholars can continue to collectively examine the components that make each effective.

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