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FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP

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The article addresses ways of combining theory and practice in order for theory to remain credible while also being meaningful and useful for practitioners. The aim of the study was to determine the areas of discrepancy or coherence between academic research and management practice by identifying how practitioner-managers understand modern-day leadership and whether their interpretations are consistent with current knowledge in this field. The empirical research included interviews with 13 managers of different genders, ages, and organizational levels, which made it possible to capture diverse perspectives and compare them with existing theoretical frameworks. The analysis of the interviews indicates that practitioners' understanding of leadership largely overlaps with dominant trends in contemporary leadership theory, such as Great Man Theory, relational leadership, situational leadership, and positive leadership. It appears that the main challenge does not lie in reconciling fundamentally opposing positions, but rather in refining the ways in which knowledge about leadership is conceptualized, disseminated, and developed so that it remains both credible and practical.

Keywords: practice, leadership, concepts, theory, leadership theory, leadership definitions

1. INTRODUCTION

This article continues the important debate on leadership research and its relevance to managerial practice, which was initiated during a symposium organized by Prof. Harten and published in the *Journal of Leadership Studies* (2026). The symposium underscores the importance of scholarly writing addressed to dual

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audiences – academic researchers and the broader public, such as managers and practitioners (Harter, 2026a).

Publications in leadership studies typically fall into two broad categories: purely scholarly articles intended for academic audiences with limited practitioner appeal, and highly cited popular books that become bestsellers among general readers (Rynes, 2007; Seemiller, 2026; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). The former are grounded in rigorous, often methodologically complex research that can be difficult for non-specialists to follow. By emphasizing such stringent theoretical frameworks at the expense of practical applicability, purely academic research achieves a substantial scholarly impact but offers limited value for managerial practice (Gresh, 2026). The latter publications tend to recount an individual's leadership journey or present experience-based models (Seemiller, 2026), frequently offering simple and catchy advice on how to become a leader. This contrast prompts an important question: Must accessibility and rigour be treated as opposing qualities, or can they be meaningfully integrated? It also invites reflections on whether it is possible to produce credible research that resonates with and reaches wider audiences.

The series of articles emerging from the symposium drew attention to several important issues related to the dissemination of knowledge: how research findings are communicated, shared, and made accessible to audiences beyond the academic community. A central problem appears to be a divergence of expectations: scholarly articles are expected to demonstrate methodological rigour, conceptual precision, and a theoretical contribution. Academic writing prioritizes transparency, clarity, and evidence-based claims (Henderson, 2026). Yet scientific texts – dense, highly theoretical, and saturated with jargon – rarely reach practitioners (Kiran, 2026). This often results in academic work that practitioners perceive as irrelevant and expressed in inaccessible language (Denning, 2007; Locke, Latham, 2021). By contrast, popular texts emphasize storytelling and readability (Alvesson, Einola, 2019), offer accessibility, narrative appeal, and practical guidance for a broad readership. Although frequently dismissed by scholars as insufficiently thorough, such works resonate strongly with wider audiences (Harter, 2023; Peters, Thomas, 2020). As Seemiller (2026, p. 1) observes, many readers, including managers, simply want to know: “What does this mean, and what can I do with this information?”. When research is not presented in an accessible way, even excellent studies may go unread. The sheer growth in academic publishing further compounds this issue. Curcic (2023) estimated that more than 5.14 million academic articles were published in 2023. Under such conditions, it is unrealistic to expect practitioners, overwhelmed by the volume of publications, to identify and engage with only the most methodologically rigorous studies (Harter, 2026b, p. 2): they are far more likely to choose simpler and more accessible forms of writing (Harter, 2026b). In other words, academic leadership literature is written by academics for academics, while leadership books in the popular press are often authored by practitioners for practitioners (Hartman, Conklin, 2026).

Another important factor, which seems to deepen the divide between academic and popular writing, is the institutional encouragement – if not requirement – of methodological rigour, since this increases the likelihood of publication in leading journals (Samul, 2026). Its internal structures, reward systems, and cultural norms often create barriers that widen the gap between scholarly output and its potential real-world impact (Ellis, 2026). Contemporary evaluation regimes, driven by metrics and institutional assessments, transform intellectual contributions into measurable performance indicators (Ellis, 2026). Academia favours peer-reviewed journals (Gresh, 2026), because these boost visibility, citation counts, and performance evaluations of individual scholars. Recognition becomes tied to compliance with evaluation criteria rather than to the intrinsic value or societal relevance of research. This disconnect between what resonates with the public and what satisfies academic criteria creates a critical tension.

The aim of the study was to determine the areas of discrepancy or coherence between academic research and management practice by identifying how practitioner-managers understand contemporary leadership and whether their interpretations are consistent with current knowledge in this field. Moreover, the article presents the ongoing debate related to the ways of bringing research and practice closer together. It examines how rigorous academic research can be communicated and applied in ways that retain its credibility while becoming more meaningful and usable for practitioners.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first, theoretical part reviews proposed solutions to the issues outlined above and advances a framework for connecting rigorous research with managerial practice. The next section presents the qualitative research methodology adopted in the study, followed by a discussion of the findings. The article concludes with final reflections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In the words of Lewin (1951, p. 169), “There is nothing more practical than a good theory”. Theory acquires tangible significance only when it is materialized in practice – most notably through writing, which is itself a socially situated act embedded in particular contexts, purposes, and relationships (Cunha, Clegg, 2026). In the field of leadership studies, a divide persists between rigorous academic scholarship and accessible popular literature: the former offers empirical robustness and theoretical depth yet often reaches a limited audience. At the same time, the latter achieves broad appeal but frequently lacks a solid theoretical foundation (Gresh, 2026).

The debate on how to bridge theory and practice continues, with opinions on this issue remaining divided. Some scholars argue that the relationship between

academic rigour and practical relevance should be approached with critical openness rather than rigid separation. Henderson (2026) maintains that researchers have a responsibility to assess popular leadership texts carefully rather than dismissing them outright, therefore clarifying both their contributions and their limitations through transparent evaluative standards.

Other scholars highlight collaborative partnerships and practice-oriented learning strategies as integrative mechanisms for bridging academic rigour and practical relevance in leadership studies. Vaade & McCready (2012) advocate co-creating tools such as case studies with practitioners, blending rigour with relevance so that leadership studies help shape the future rather than merely interpret it. Likewise, Neufeld & Birkinshaw (2026) underscore the value of the case method as a bridge between theory and practice. Well-crafted cases situate readers within complex, real-world dilemmas, foreground uncertainty, and cultivate reflective judgment. They preserve complexity without oversimplification and foster engagement across professional and academic boundaries. By contrast, Hartman & Conklin (2026) drawing on the hermeneutic circle, Hartman & Conklin (2026) propose interpreting popular leadership texts not as threats to academic credibility but as opportunities for reflection and reorientation. Rather than treating them as failed scholarship, their appeal may be understood phenomenologically, as grounded in lived experience. In this sense, popular texts can serve as portals to understanding how leadership is enacted and interpreted in practice, enabling scholars, metaphorically, to “see the pearl resting among the sand” (Hartman, Conklin, 2026, p. 3).

Similarly, Gresh (2026) highlights hybrid forms of writing that combine academic rigour with practical application. Such works provide a productive space for examining models that enhance societal impact while preserving scholarly integrity. They challenge the assumption that rigour and popularity are mutually exclusive, instead emphasizing both relevance and credibility. A related critique is advanced by Riskawati et al. (2026), who argue that framing rigour and popularity as polar opposites reflects Western, text-centred traditions. For example, in Indonesia, leadership knowledge is rarely shaped primarily through academic journals or management bestsellers. In contrast, it emerges from lived experience, oral traditions, cultural symbols, everyday practices, and digital platforms. Based on case studies of two Indonesian regional leaders, Riskawati et al. (2026) demonstrate that leadership legitimacy can be constructed through tangible outcomes, symbolic actions, and narrative presence rather than through written doctrine. Their lessons circulated through storytelling, community engagement, and online visibility, reaching audiences beyond formal readership.

Finally, Campbell et al. (2023) introduce the notion of the “pracademic”, an individual who combines lived professional experience with scholarship, thereby enhancing legitimacy and integrative capacity. As Seemiller (2026) suggests, personal professional experience can bolster the credibility of academic inquiry.

Practical solutions may also include dual abstracts – one scholarly and one accessible to a broader audience – thus institutionalizing the commitment to both rigour and reach.

The above perspectives illustrate that the debate is not just about choosing between theory and practice, but also being open to ways to combine them if necessary.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore how leadership is currently understood and interpreted by management practitioners. The use of interviews was justified by the exploratory nature of the study, as the semi-structured format, though guided by predetermined thematic prompts, allowed the researcher to pursue emerging insights in depth and follow unexpected lines of inquiry (Magaldi, Berler, 2018). These sought to capture managers' own meanings, experiences, and interpretations of leadership in practice. Such an approach enabled rich, nuanced data to be collected, which could not be obtained through standardized survey instruments.

The research tool was an original interview questionnaire that included the following: information about the researcher and the purpose of the study, a statement ensuring anonymity, the main interview questions, demographic questions (gender, age, professional experience, and managerial position), and a closing note of appreciation for participants' time. The results constitute a part of broader research.

Interviews were conducted between October 2024 and January 2025 with 13 managers actively involved in organizational management practice. Each interview lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and took place either at the respondent's workplace or at the researcher's chosen location.

A convenience sampling strategy was applied. It allows members of the target population to be recruited primarily based on their immediate availability and accessibility to the researcher (Golzar et al., 2022). Despite its limitations, this approach provided access to participants who met the inclusion criteria and possessed relevant professional experience in a cost-effective, less time-consuming, and simple manner (Golzar et al., 2022). The following inclusion criteria were established: full-time employment within an organization, ensuring that participants' perspectives were grounded in ongoing organizational practice; holding managerial positions at different hierarchical levels, enabling the collection of diverse viewpoints on the studied phenomenon; and willingness to participate in the study. Table 1 presents the characteristics of respondents. The group included both women and men, representing top, middle, and low-level managerial positions. Their ages ranged from 18 to over 54 years, showing a mix of earlycareer and experienced employees. Most respondents held either higher or secondary education. Their professional experience varied widely – from less than one year

to more than 20 years – providing perspectives from both newcomers and long-tenured professionals.

Table 1. Characteristic of respondents

No.	Interview date	Gender	Job Position	Age	Education	Professional experience
1	29.10.2024	female	Middle-level manager	30	higher	4-10 years
2	31.10.2024	female	Top-level manager	43	higher	11-20 years
3	13.11.2024	female	Top-level manager	45	higher	4-10 years
4	13.11.2024	female	Top-level manager	45	higher	more than 20 years
5	08.12.2024	male	Low-level manager	18	secondary	1-3 years
6	09.12.2024	male	Low-level manager	24	secondary	4-10 years
7	09.12.2024	male	Top-level manager	54	higher	less than 20 years
8	10.12.2024	male	Low-level manager	25	secondary	4-10 years
9	10.12.2024	female	Low-level manager	40+	higher	11-20 years
10	13.12.2024	female	Low-level manager	20	secondary	less than 1 year
11	07.01.2025	female	Middle-level manager	37	higher	11-20 years
12	08.01.2025	female	Middle-level manager	41	secondary	11-20 years
13	10.01.2025	male	Low-level manager	36	secondary	11-20 years

Source: own collaboration.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The definitions provided by managers reveal a coherent and multidimensional understanding of leadership, grounded in both interpersonal influence and strategic direction. A thematic analysis of these definitions indicates several dominant meanings.

Firstly, the managers highlight the typical characteristics of leadership, such as the importance of vision, direction, and goal coherence. Leadership is described as “pointing the direction”, “presenting a vision worth working for”, and aligning mission, vision, and goals into a consistent framework. Leaders are expected to not only articulate a compelling future state but also make key decisions in dynamic and uncertain environments. Leadership is therefore associated with strategic sensemaking and foresight (tab. 2).

Table 2. Traditional leadership definitions by managers

It is a process based on managing in such a way that people gather around a specific goal, mission, or project; it takes into account broadly understood management, both hard indicators and soft aspects, such as relationships, team rules, and group values.
Indicating the direction.
For me, leadership is a mission, vision, and goals that are coherent with one another. They should take people and their development into account. Leadership must have a good strategy that is responsible not only for what is done, but also for what is not done.
Presenting a vision that others will be willing to work for and being a person who can make key decisions in difficult conditions.
A majestic person.

Source: own elaboration.

Secondly, leadership is understood as influence (tab. 3). Nearly all respondents describe the leader as someone who “directs the actions of others”, “influences a group toward goals”, or “motivates people through authority rather than coercion”. This positions leadership as a social and relational process in which intentional influence plays a central role. Influence is not framed as positional power, but as the ability to gain voluntary followership.

Table 3. Relational leadership definitions by managers

Leadership means the ability to inspire and draw crowds behind you. It is being an authority for others and thus giving direction to their actions. It is motivating people to act naturally, by choice and through authority, not through coercion or violence.
It takes into account what is broadly understood as management, both hard indicators and soft aspects, such as relationships, team rules, and group values.
It is a person who influences a group of people, directing their actions toward achieving goals.
Leadership is always exerting influence in order to achieve engagement – a state in which another person, group, or team is ready to use their reserves (do something beyond the norm). Engagement in this case is a higher form (attitude) of readiness to act than “standard” motivation (towards or away from something).
Managing people, influencing their decisions, and motivating them to act.
It is the ability to inspire team members to work together, to continuously improve, and to lead by example – demonstrating that adaptability to a changing environment is an essential element of good cooperation.
Leadership is the process of influencing others to achieve shared goals.

Source: own elaboration.

Next, the managers strongly emphasize the ways of influence on others through inspiration, motivation, and the capacity to generate engagement (tab. 4). Many definitions stress inspiring others to act “naturally and by choice”, creating conditions for individuals to “go beyond the norm”, or encouraging teams to commit their discretionary effort. Engagement rather than compliance is thus treated as the hallmark of effective leadership. The ability to stimulate emotional energy and intrinsic motivation emerges as a defining feature. Several definitions underscore the centrality of human development, relationships, and shared values. Leadership is not seen merely as task coordination but as an interpersonal process that involves nurturing growth, fostering cooperation, and grounding team functioning in values.

Table 4. Employee-Oriented Leadership definitions by managers

Leadership means the ability to inspire and draw crowds behind you. It is being an authority for others and thus giving direction to their actions. It is motivating people to act naturally, by choice and through authority, not through coercion or violence.
Presenting a vision that others will be willing to work for and being a person who can make key decisions in difficult conditions.
Leadership is always exerting influence in order to achieve engagement – a state in which another person, group, or team is ready to use their reserves (do something beyond the norm). Engagement in this case is a higher form (attitude) of readiness to act than “standard” motivation (towards or away from something).
Managing people, influencing their decisions, and motivating them to act.
It is the ability to inspire team members to work together, to continuously improve, and to lead by example – demonstrating that adaptability to a changing environment is an essential element of good cooperation.
The ability to inspire, motivate, and guide people in such a way that they act in a manner leading to the achievement of specific objectives.
Leadership is the process of influencing others to achieve shared goals. It means not only exercising authority or managing a team, but above all, inspiring, motivating, and building trust.

Source: own elaboration.

Finally, the managers draw a clear distinction between leadership and management. Leadership is portrayed as “something more” than supervising procedures or administering tasks. Whereas management is associated with structure and technical control, leadership is characterized by emotional influence, relational competence, and vision-driven action.

Table 5. Leadership vs. management definitions by managers

Leadership means the ability to inspire and draw crowds behind you. It is being an authority for others and thus giving direction to their actions. It is motivating people to act naturally, by choice and through authority, not through coercion or violence.

In my view, leadership is something more than managing staff or supervising procedures. It is the ability to inspire team members to work together, to continuously improve, and to lead by example – demonstrating that adaptability to a changing environment is an essential element of good cooperation.

Source: own elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION

The managerial understanding of leadership aligns closely with several major theoretical schools in leadership research. References to a “majestic person” relate to the Great Man Theory (Carlyle, 1841; Spector, 2016). While this perspective is not the predominant one, it indicates that some managers still associate leadership with unique qualities that naturally attract followers.

Furthermore, the managers’ references to decision-making in difficult conditions, adaptability, and contextual responsiveness suggest affinities with situational leadership models (Hersey, Blanchard, 1969). These models argue that effective leadership depends on matching leadership behaviours to the needs of followers and the demands of the environment. The recognition that leadership must be exercised differently in periods of uncertainty or strategic ambiguity reflects a situational lens.

The stress on interpersonal influence and relational dynamics is congruent with relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), which conceptualizes leadership as a process emerging from interactions and social exchanges rather than from individual traits. Respondents who focus on trust-building, shared values, and team rules implicitly endorse a relational perspective, aligning leadership with ongoing social construction rather than static positional authority.

Interestingly, the definitions show limited alignment with transactional leadership (Bass, 1985), which focuses on rewards, exchanges, and compliance. This absence reinforces the notion that managers primarily view leadership as a transformative, relational, and developmental process, rather than a control-based or extrinsically motivated one.

The idea of leadership as indicating a direction, establishing coherent goals, and mobilizing collective action aligns with goal-oriented and visionary leadership theories (House, Shamir, 1993; Kouzes, Posner, 2003). These frameworks emphasize the leader’s role in articulating a meaningful vision that inspires intrinsic motivation and collective commitment – precisely the attributes highlighted by several managers.

Some of the managers' definitions also refer to more contemporary leadership concepts, particularly those associated with positive leadership theories. The emphasis on inspiration, vision, and follower development corresponds directly with transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; Forester, Clegg, 1991). Transformational leaders boost followers' motivation by articulating a compelling vision, stimulating intellectual growth, and addressing individual developmental needs – elements repeatedly mentioned by respondents.

Additionally, several definitions highlight leaders' attentiveness to human growth, values, and relationships. This reflects the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2011), in which leaders place follower development and ethical responsibility at the heart of their practice. The managers who describe leadership as creating conditions for cooperation, enabling personal development, and demonstrating exemplary behaviour echo the servant leadership perspective, which positions the leader as a facilitator rather than a commander.

The managers' understandings of leadership largely align with established theoretical knowledge rather than diverging from it. Their definitions do not depart from what is commonly discussed in academic research; instead, they reflect core assumptions and themes present in the leadership literature. Notably, many of their descriptions correspond with the main research streams in the field and, in several cases, resonate with more contemporary leadership theories. This suggests that practical managerial perspectives on leadership are not only consistent with scholarly discourse but also informed by its current developments.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to examine the tension between academic knowledge and practical perspective in leadership research and to explore whether this divide is reflected in how leadership is understood by practitioners. While the literature frequently portrays academic scholarship and managerial practice as operating in separate spheres, these findings suggest a more nuanced reality.

The interviews conducted with managers indicate that practitioners' understandings of leadership largely reflect dominant trends in contemporary leadership theory. The managers emphasized themes such as inspiring others, guiding and supporting teams, fostering trust-based relationships, and cultivating positive organizational climates. These elements resonate strongly with current theoretical developments, particularly approaches grounded in positive leadership perspectives that foreground inspiration, relationality, empowerment, and meaning-making. Although practitioners tend to rely on narrative-driven and experience-based sources of knowledge, the substance of their views reflects core constructs widely discussed in scholarly literature.

This convergence suggests that, despite ongoing debates about accessibility and dissemination, there is a considerable degree of coherence between academic and managerial conceptions of leadership. While the channels of knowledge transmission differ, the underlying conceptualizations often overlap to a significant extent.

Theoretically, the study contributes to leadership scholarship by challenging the assumption that rigour and relevance are necessarily opposites. The findings support the argument that contemporary leadership theories, particularly those informed by positive and relational paradigms, have permeated managerial discourse, even if indirectly. This underscores the importance of examining not only how theories are constructed, but also how they circulate, are interpreted, and become embedded in practice. Recognizing areas of convergence can shift the debate from one of division to one of mutual enrichment.

For scholars and journal editors, the results highlight the importance of communicating research findings in accessible yet methodologically robust ways. This may involve developing hybrid publication formats, practitioner-oriented summaries, dual abstracts (academic and practice-focused), or collaborative projects with managers. Such strategies can enhance societal impact without compromising scientific standards. For practitioners, the findings affirm that engaging with evidence-based leadership research does not require abandoning experiential knowledge. On the contrary, reflective dialogue between scholarly insights and lived managerial experience can strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of research.

This study has several limitations. Its qualitative research design and the relatively small sample of managers further restrict the generalizability of the findings, as the results are based on in-depth, context-specific insights rather than broadly representative data. Consequently, the interpretations derived from the study should be understood as exploratory and illustrative rather than universally applicable. In addition, the research was conducted within a specific cultural and organizational context, which may significantly influence how leadership is perceived, interpreted, and enacted by participants. Cultural norms, organizational structures, and shared values may have shaped both the behaviours reported and the meanings attributed to leadership practices, thereby limiting the transferability of the findings to other settings with different contextual characteristics. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported understandings of leadership rather than direct observation of leadership practices.

Future research could expand the empirical base through cross-cultural comparisons, larger mixed-methods studies, or longitudinal designs examining how leadership knowledge evolves. Further investigation into specific mechanisms of knowledge translation, such as hybrid publications, digital platforms, or co-created research with practitioners, would also deepen understanding of how rigour and relevance can be more systematically integrated.

In conclusion, although dilemmas regarding combining scientific and practical knowledge remain significant, the results suggest that the divide between

leadership scholars and practitioners may be less pronounced than is often assumed. The challenge lies not in reconciling fundamentally opposing views, but in refining the ways leadership knowledge is articulated, disseminated, and developed more effectively.

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OD BADAŃ DO PRAKTYKI: TEORETYCZNA I PRAKTYCZNA PERSPEKTYWA PRZYWÓDZTWA

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy sposobów łączenia teorii i praktyki w taki sposób, aby teoria zachowała swoją wiarygodność naukową, a jednocześnie była zrozumiała i użyteczna dla praktyków zarządzania. Celem badania było określenie obszarów ewentualnych rozbieżności oraz zgodności między wiedzą akademicką a praktyką menedżerską poprzez analizę tego, w jaki sposób menedżerowie praktycy interpretują współczesne przywództwo oraz czy ich



rozumienie jest spójne z aktualnym stanem wiedzy w tym obszarze. Badanie empiryczne obejmowało wywiady przeprowadzone z 13 menedżerami reprezentującymi zróżnicowane cechy demograficzne, takie jak płeć i wiek, a także różne poziomy w strukturze organizacyjnej. Dzięki temu możliwe było uchwycenie szerokiego spektrum perspektyw oraz ich zestawienie z istniejącymi ramami teoretycznymi funkcjonującymi w literaturze przedmiotu. Analiza zgromadzonego materiału badawczego wskazuje, że sposób rozumienia przywództwa przez praktyków w dużej mierze pokrywa się z dominującymi nurtami współczesnej teorii przywództwa, w tym m.in. z teorią wielkiego człowieka, przywództwem relacyjnym, sytuacyjnym oraz pozytywnym. Wyniki sugerują również, że główne wyzwanie w tym obszarze nie polega na godzeniu całkowicie sprzecznych stanowisk, lecz raczej na doskonaleniu sposobów konceptualizacji, komunikowania oraz rozwijania wiedzy o przywództwie.

Słowa kluczowe: przywództwo, praktyka, teoria, teorie przywództwa, koncepcje przywództwa, definicje przywództwa