Leading to inspire others: charismatic influence or hard work?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to examine inspiring others as a psychological construct in leadership contexts by investigating lived and personal experiences of inspiring leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – A phenomenological design was used to investigate leaders’ personal and lived experiences of leading to inspire others. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven participants nominated by others as inspiring leaders based on the demonstration of five characteristics (vision, openness, transparency, passion, and being somewhat unconventional).

Findings – Participant responses coalesced into five key dimensions of leading to inspire others: connecting, leading, inspiree, action, and context; enabling a functional description of the phenomenon. Furthermore, results indicated that leaders could intentionally cultivate opportunities to inspire others through interaction and effort.

Research limitations/implications – Given that the paper investigates leaders’ experiences of the phenomenon, further investigation into the relational and reciprocal aspects of inspiring others is required. Research has primarily focused on participants in the inspiring relationship independently of each other (i.e. either the inspiree or the leader).

Practical implications – Contrary to assertions in some transformational leadership studies that personal charisma is the primary component to inspiring others, these findings indicate that inspiring others requires an active process where leaders establish interpersonal connections and enable action.

Originality/value – Research on inspiration is at a formative stage. This paper represents an initial foray into the space where scholarly knowledge on leadership theory and inspiration intersect to provide greater insight into leading to inspire others.

Keywords Inspiration, Inspiring others, Connecting, Active process, Leadership, Leaders

An initial perception of research on inspiration is that the distinction between inspiration, motivation, hope, and creativity are blurred. Often these terms are used interchangeably or sometimes in combination (e.g. inspirational motivation, hope inspiration). Goddard (1981) viewed hope as inspiration and Cutcliffe (2006) investigated the concept of hope inspiration. Chamorro-Premuzic (2006) suggested that although creativity has a long history in psychology, it has recently been conceptualized as inspiration. Thrash (2007) posited that inspiration is not creativity, but rather a state in which creative products are often produced. Although conjecture exists about inspiration as a construct, there is one quintessential feature of inspiration upon which researchers agree. Inspiration is a temporary state (Allport and Odber,
1936) and occurs in a moment. Council (1988) reported that the inspirational moment is brief and beautiful and Nachmanovich (1990) was of the view that in the moment of inspiration there is energy, clarity, and beauty. Hymer (1990) confirmed the presence of intense energy in the moment and posited it is surprising because it arrives quickly and unexpectedly.

In contrast, inspirational motivation has received much attention in transformational leadership research. Moss and Ritossa (2007) confirmed inspirational motivation as an established component of transformational leadership theory. Inspirational motivation emphasizes the charismatic influence of leaders and the empowerment of subordinates as key tenets (Zaccaro, 2001). Moreover transformational leaders have been found to possess charisma, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985; Conger and Kanungo, 1998). García-Morales et al. (2008) described inspiration as the ability to motivate followers, primarily through the communication of high-level expectations. Despite the growing body of research on inspirational motivation and its confirmation that people know inspirational leaders, the knowledge about inspiration as a discrete phenomenon remains largely abstract (Frese et al., 2003). Furthermore, Yukl (1999) indicated that theoretical ambiguity existed around the definition of the transformational behaviors used by leaders.

**Inspiration as a construct**

Thrash and Elliot (2003) and Degaard (2005) asserted that inspiration could be conceptualized as a distinct psychological process. Engen (2005) concurred and proposed inspiration had significance within the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology is the study of positive emotion, positive character, and those things that enable people to flourish (Seligman et al., 2005). Hart (1998) concluded that inspiration is extremely important to the ability to live life with vitality and meaning. Meaningful life, cited by Seligman (2002) as one of the three routes to personal happiness, could be the nexus between inspiration and positive psychology. Clarity of inspiration as a construct within positive psychology began to emerge through Thrash and Elliot’s (2003, p. 873) study, when they summarized inspiration as “a broad construct that spans multiple domains (e.g., religious, creative), sources (e.g., intrapsychic, external), triggers (e.g., illumination, nature), transcendent qualities (e.g., beauty, goodness), and targets (e.g., products, possible selves)”. Distilling the quintessential definition of inspiration from research, however, is problematic. Although Council (1988) suggested inspiration extends beyond any definition because it is a random feeling that produces positive emotion, researchers have attempted to describe the phenomenon. Rourke (1983) described inspiration as a physically transformative experience affecting the whole person that changes how an individual experiences the world. Tschang and Szczywpula (2006) defined inspiration as a specific instance or artifact that affects our thinking, at a particular moment or in a particular way, to trigger the mutation of a concept. Engen (2005) concluded that inspiration is an experience that integrates emotional, behavioral, intellectual, and sensory capacities to enable people to act in novel and effective ways.

being inspired as influencing our general state of consciousness, without concern for any tangible product. Alternatively, inspired to requires individuals to accept greater responsibility through self-efficacy to achieve action (Thrash and Elliot, 2004). Thrash and Elliot (2003) found being inspired to involves a trigger object (i.e. a superior individual) and a target object (i.e. a future self). Lockwood and Kunda (1997) provided an example where budding athletes may watch a superlative Olympic performance, envision themselves standing on the podium in the future, and take action toward attaining that vision. Although research (Hart, 1998; Thrash and Elliot, 2003, 2004) indicates inspiration exists as an emotionally uplifting state, the same researchers place an emphasis on inspiration leading to action. For example, Hart (1998) asserted that inspiration is that moment when ideas are converted into action. Thrash and Elliot (2003) found trigger objects motivate the inspired individual to transmit, actualize, or emulate, therefore it is conceivable that the moment of inspiration creates energy and confidence within people that stimulates action.

A leadership perspective
The term inspiration has been synonymous with leadership for many years. Clemens and Mayer (1999) proposed that the central aspects of effective leadership are motivation, inspiration, sensitivity, and communication, and that these aspects have changed little over the last 300 years. Furthermore, Petersen and Seligman (2004) asserted that leadership was a charismatic or transformational influence used to inspire others. Bass and Avolio (1993) considered that transformational leaders have a vision, trustworthiness, and the ability to inspire and motivate. It is evident from the research that inspirational leaders have a tremendous effect on people. Transformational leaders inspire followers to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming followers’ attitudes, beliefs, and values (Bass, 1985). Participants in Kinjerski and Skrypnek’s (2006) study confirmed that inspiring leaders enabled transformation in others by creating shared meaning, and Sosik and Dinger (2007) found that leaders have the ability to inspire others by acting as powerful role models for followers.

Vision
Vision is central to the concept of transformational and charismatic leadership (Sosik and Dinger, 2007). Furthermore, Kark et al. (2003) defined the term inspirational motivation as the creation and presentation of an attractive vision of the future and the demonstration of optimism and enthusiasm. The benefit of visioning is that it provides the rationale as to why individuals should strive to achieve goals (Densten, 2005). McCann et al. (2006) described transformational leaders as exceptional and having extraordinary effects on their followers, primarily by being able to commit them to the leader’s and organization’s vision. Participants in Degaard’s (2005) study proposed the primary role of inspiration was providing the vision and the driving force for action and performance. Thrash and Elliot (2003) posited that inspiration could manifest as visions of a possible future self. Moreover, Densten (2005) found that visions of a positive future self have beneficial effects on personal wellbeing. Visions are the lifeblood of inspirational motivation (Sosik et al., 1998) and inexorably linked to the phenomenon of inspiration (Degaard, 2005).
Leadership paradoxes
Theorists emphasize leadership as a transformational influence used to inspire others. Henry’s (2005) study identified “inspire and motivate people” as one of the nine key characteristics of effective leadership. Furthermore, inspiring leadership was found to be a critical trait in the top 100 best companies in the USA (Leiber, 1998). Paradoxically, inspiration is the leadership behavior that leaders struggle with most. Research conducted by Mount Eliza Business School confirmed that there were few inspiring leaders (Lee, 2003). Furthermore, Kouzes and Posner (2003) found that only one in ten leaders consider themselves to be inspiring. On one hand, theory insists transformational leaders are inspirational to be effective yet in practice there seems to be a paucity of inspiring leaders. As indicated, vision has a nexus with inspiration and inspirational motivation. Berson et al. (2001) and Abu-Tineh et al. (2008) promoted the need for transformational leaders to craft vision statements. Alternatively, Bennis and Nanus (1985) found that inspirational leaders rarely conceive the vision, however they are likely to choose the most appropriate image from those available and then articulate it, give it form, and focus people’s attention on it. Such paradoxes require further investigation.

There is a strong emphasis on leaders being the charismatic source of inspiration with little comment on the process by which transformational leaders inspire others (Mio et al., 2005). Neither leaders nor followers interact in a vacuum and it seems apparent that factors beyond leaders’ charisma influence and promote inspiration. Motivational climate plays a part in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people in that environment (Chi, 2004). For example, Council (1988) proposed that it was possible to woo inspiration by creating an environment that is positive, conducive to exploration, and supportive of personal freedom. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) considered it easier to enhance creativity by changing the environment, and the conditions within it, rather than trying to make people think more creatively. The immediate environment appears to play a role in inspiring others. Additionally, peers can be a source of inspiration to others. Gerrard et al. (2005) found that people trying to quit smoking drew inspiration from others in their group. When people saw others progressing confidently toward cessation, or others who had quit, they reported being inspired to work hard and achieve that goal for themselves. Additionally, Taylor and Lobel (1989) revealed that cancer patients preferred contact with other patients who were doing better than themselves to gain inspiration. In the creative context, Burleson et al. (2005) found that students reflected on their peers’ ideas to inspire new designs and concepts that they considered were beyond the norm of what they could have achieved in isolation. It is posited that leaders relying solely on charisma to inspire others may be one-dimensional.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was not to test hypotheses but to analyze personal and lived experiences of inspiring leaders to investigate the phenomenon of inspiration and inspiring others in a real-world context. We believed that examining inspiring leaders’ experiences of the phenomenon would identify leadership processes that culminate in the inspiration of others. Key research questions to guide the process included:

RQ1. How have leaders experienced the manifestation of inspiration?
**RQ2.** What is the result or outcome of inspiration?

**RQ3.** What are leaders’ experiences of leading to inspire others?

**RQ4.** Can leaders intentionally inspire others or purposely evoke the inspiration of others?

**RQ5.** What role does vision play in the process of inspiring others?

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**Method**

A qualitative approach using a phenomenological design was selected to investigate inspiring others from a leader’s perspective. Phenomenological design seeks to understand experiences of a phenomenon from other people’s perspectives with the aim of identifying the essence of their experiences (Creswell et al., 2007) and is well suited to the study of psychological concepts such as inspiration (Smith and Eatough, 2007).

**Participants**

The sample for the study was purposive (i.e. those people from which the most could be learned were selected; Suzuki et al., 2007). Leaders, nominated as inspiring by other people, were the target sample because they were best suited to constructing a social reality of the phenomenon (Stubblefield and Murray, 2002) and provided an informed description of the essences of the phenomenon (Wertz, 2005). The sample included seven participants ranging in age from 21 to over 60, with most participants ($n=3$) in the 40-45 year age group and from an Anglo-European background. Phenomenological studies should consist of a sample between three to ten participants (Suzuki et al., 2007). Pseudonyms were used for purposes of confidentiality. Participants were intentionally selected from a broad range of industries to ensure results could be generalized. Participants were: Bob, President of a community based organization with over 40,000 members; Emily, Public Sector CEO in an organization with more than 60,000 staff; Jakob, Olympic and World Championship coach; John, church leader involved with youth-based missionary work; Lisa, leader of a team that works with victims of domestic violence; Meg, CEO and owner of a fitness education business; and Shelley, union organizer advocating for workers’ rights.

**Procedure**

From a research design perspective we decided to investigate important generic themes from participants’ data as opposed to reporting detailed and nuanced data about individuals themselves (Smith and Eatough, 2007). Selecting inspiring leaders by simply rating leaders as inspirational seemed rather limited because people may have different perceptions of the term. It was important to guide nominees by providing characteristics of inspiring leaders gleaned from literature to ensure leaders were nominated from a consistent set of indicators. There have been attempts to clarify characteristics of inspiring leaders (Conger and Kanungo, 1998; House, 1996) and we considered specifying characteristics would ensure the sample provided purposive lived experiences. People were asked to nominate inspiring leaders who exhibited the prescribed characteristics:
• Visionary – leaders develop a clear view of the future in collaboration with those around them (Conger and Kanungo, 1998; House, 1996; Kakabadse et al., 2005).

• Openness – leaders demonstrate empathy for others, encourage social support structures, and are receptive to others’ ideas (Hymer, 1990; McCann et al., 2006; Zhou and George, 2003).

• Transparency – leaders portray a true sense of self (e.g. authenticity) and do not pretend to be something they are not (Avolio, 2007; Hart, 1998; Sidani, 2007).

• Passionate – leaders have a strong belief or focus that generates enthusiasm in those around them (Bono and Ilies, 2006; Kinjerski and Skrypnek, 2006; Wallis, 2002).

• Somewhat unconventional – leaders are prepared to do things differently and operate outside “normal” boundaries (Avolio, 2007; Council, 1988; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Shin and Zhou, 2003).

Where a leader was nominated by four or more people, that person was invited to be part of the study. Where a leader received one nomination, three additional people who knew the nominee were sent a questionnaire and asked to rate the nominee on the prescribed characteristics using a Likert scale of 1 (never exhibiting characteristics) to 5 (always exhibiting characteristics). When nominees scored 40 or higher (out of a possible 50), they were invited to participate in the study. Leaders who were nominated by one person and received incomplete or no other endorsement via the questionnaire process were not eligible to participate.

Data gathering
Consistent with phenomenological design, data were gathered through relatively unstructured and in-depth recorded interviews (Suzuki et al., 2007). Time spent on interviews ranged from 33 to 75 minutes with most taking 60 minutes. Each interview began with a grand tour question (Suzuki et al., 2007), a broad open question seeking to understand participants’ general experiences of inspiring others. A series of broad topics (i.e. personal experiences of inspiring others, intentionally inspiring others, the moment of inspiration, and results of inspiring moments) were identified and constructed as open-ended questions during the interview process. Follow-up questions were asked based on the context and flow of the dialogue. During the interview process, the primary researcher maintained a journal to record detailed notes and reflections to contribute to the trustworthiness of the research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Wertz, 2005; Yeh and Inman, 2007). A focus group consisting of two of the original participants came together following analysis of data as the final process of validation (Colaizzi, 1978).

Data analysis
Analysis commenced with listening to and transcribing data because it provided researchers with an opportunity to grasp the participants’ intent in the broadest context (Wertz, 2005). Data analysis of in-depth interviews followed Colaizzi’s (1978) steps:

1. review participants’ descriptions;
2. extract significant statements;
3. formulate themes from significant statements;
(4) organize themes into clusters;
(5) refer theme clusters back to the original descriptions;
(6) distil results into a description of the phenomenon; and
(7) ask participants how themes and clusters compare with their experiences as a final validation.

Two international psychology research students were used as independent raters. Raters are people independent of the research process who simply look for common and divergent themes across original transcripts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The raters reviewed transcripts independently, took notes, and highlighted key aspects of the transcripts that seemed to have powerful meaning in the context of the transcript. Concurrently, the primary researcher organized data into theme clusters. The researcher and raters met to discuss analyses and debated issues until consensus on key themes was achieved and distilled into five core dimensions. Both authors used the dimensions to describe the essence of the phenomenon. The focus group validated the core dimensions and themes against their own experiences.

Results
As a result of the analysis, participants’ responses coalesced into five key dimensions of leading to inspire others. The dimensions were:

1. connecting;
2. leader;
3. inspiree;
4. action; and
5. context.

After reading transcripts of the interviews, completing the reflective process of data analysis, and distilling the dimensions of the phenomenon, we were in a position to describe the essence of leading to inspire others. We propose that leading to inspire others could be described as:

[... ] an active process of connecting with others to leverage off a moment that enables others to crystallize visions of new or different possibilities, that would not have been attained alone, energizing them to actualize new possibilities and achieve their potential.

Connecting
The central dimension of leading to inspire others is connecting (see Figure 1). During the focus group, Lisa confirmed, “Oh yes, from my experience it is clearly the connection, there has got to be a connection.” Without a connection between leaders and inspirees, it appears inspiration will not eventuate. “For me inspiration is often about being connected to other people,” reflected Shelley. Table I outlines the key themes that comprise the dimension of connecting.

Connect with others
John suggested connecting with others was based on matching the belief systems between leaders and inspirees. Relationships form by inspirees identifying with
leaders and understanding their values. Jakob didn’t believe leaders could inspire others if there wasn’t a solid relationship. When connecting in the inspirational moment, Bob felt there was reciprocity, “I’m inspiring them to do it and the response I get back from them, it’s like a chemistry, you sort of get it coming back at you . . . It’s almost reverse inspiration.”

Inspiring leaders often connect inspirees to their potential so they can see it for themselves. Meg said, “I believe a leader is someone who can see something in you that you can’t see yourself.” Jakob concurred, “Everyone has a great potential . . . great leadership guides people towards that potential on a very individual basis”. Lisa said, “I am really interested in looking for that spark or that tiny flame that you can put air on, blow, and make the flame bigger.”

**Communicate with others**

As humans we build connections through how and what we communicate. Emily reinforced, “never underestimate the challenge and the criticality of communication in this whole mix.” Participants emphasized the need to share aspects of their own lives, to humanize themselves as leaders. Personal stories from leaders were seen as great way to do that. Stories also added value to inspiring others. Meg stated:

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Cluster</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect with others</td>
<td>Connecting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power of vision</td>
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**Figure 1.**

Interrelationship between the five dimensions of leading to inspire others.
I think that stories are a great way to help the brain create a picture. Creating pictures provides an opportunity to see what is possible – when you can see what is possible is it easier to achieve that possibility and get a result.

The power of vision
Vision is a critical ingredient for inspiring others. From the participants’ perspective it is evident that leaders must have a clear vision of the future and be able to articulate that vision to those around them. Nevertheless, participants suggested that individuals (i.e. followers) must have a personal vision to drive action and performance. Jakob provided this insight:

I think if you don’t have a vision you will never perform great. If you don’t know where you want to go or what you want to achieve then you will just perform, you can perform at a good level but you will never grow as fast as someone who has this vision, this drive.

Participants reinforced the need for leaders to build a collective vision for the organization by listening, testing ideas, and seeking feedback. When the collective vision of the future was finalized, leaders mobilized the vision. Emily suggested leaders have to, “advocate for that future, you need to paint a picture of what that will look like, feel like.” Meg proposed that inspirational leadership constituted helping people develop their own personal visions or pictures. Shelley reflected that inspirees often connect to a larger vision because, “it’s almost like they have an internal vision of what that could look like for them.”

Leading
Emily reported, “the principal accountability of a leader is to inspire others to follow and contribute to the goals of the organization.” Table II outlines the key themes that comprise the dimension of leading.

Being yourself
Being yourself encapsulates the intrinsic qualities of the leader. Being yourself, acting in congruence with yourself, and presenting yourself in a natural way to others were consistent messages from participants. Shelley concluded, “I don’t think you can sell a message or inspire someone if you don’t believe it yourself … because I think people can tell really easily when you are being disingenuous or putting on an act.”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<td>Self reflection</td>
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<td>Be strong</td>
<td>About self</td>
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<td>Natural presence</td>
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<td>Seize the moment</td>
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<td>Leading</td>
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<td>Intentionally inspire</td>
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<td>Inspiring others</td>
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<td>Knowing you inspire</td>
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<td>Active process</td>
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Table II. Themes comprising the leading dimension
Inspiring others

Participants were emphatic in their view that leaders could intentionally inspire others. John stated, “I think you can choose to call people to come with you or to go on a journey and I think that’s where you’re intentional about wanting to inspire people to do something different.” Inspiring others requires effort, knowing the right moment, and seizing upon it. Jakob emphasized inspiring moments, “never just happen, there’s always an active process behind everything.” Bob advocated, “you’ve got to position yourself in the right place at the right time. So it’s timing, you’ve got to think about it and you’ve got to make that inspirational moment at the right time.” The skill for leaders to inspire others is sensing the “right” moment and identifying triggers to enable inspiration. “In that moment you have to get people to believe in themselves and that the outcome then will be different, one closer to their potential,” reflected Jakob.

Inspiree

Although the research focused on inspiring leaders, participants recounted their experiences of being inspired and what transpired before the moment of inspiration. For inspiration to manifest within inspirees, participants highlighted the need for inspirees to have a burning desire or passion, believe that their desire or passion is attainable, be open to new possibilities, and identify or connect with leaders. It is plausible that a number of antecedents, including the ones mentioned, must exist for individuals if they are to be inspired by connecting with leaders.

Action

John posed this rhetorical question: “So is inspiration, inspiration if nothing happens with it?” Participants emphasized that inspiration was nothing without action. John reflected, “inspiration needs to lead to action because otherwise it will just be a whole heap of hot air.” Table III outlines the key themes that comprise the dimension of action.

Taking action

Participants were adamant that inspiration enables people to do something practical or tangible proceeding the inspiring moment. When asked how they knew they had inspired others, participants stated they could see tangible results of inspiring

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<th>Theme</th>
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<td>Doing it</td>
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<td>Going beyond</td>
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<td>Taking steps</td>
<td>Taking action</td>
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<td>Action plan</td>
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<td>Engage them</td>
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<td>Enable them</td>
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<td>Understand them</td>
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<td>Create pictures for them</td>
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<td>Empower them</td>
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Table III. Themes comprising the action dimension.
moments. Results Emily saw, from an inspiring event she orchestrated, included people being actively involved in the organization and an increase in commercial revenue. To facilitate action, leaders need to articulate a way forward and encourage inspirees. Lisa said, “I am inclined to say to them look you can do it, just give it a go, and let’s look at the steps to do it.”

Enable them
The best way to engage inspirees is for leaders to identify and comprehend desires within either the person or the collective. Emily remarked, “you can’t mobilize an organization if you don’t set out to engage people and capture their enthusiasm.” Once people are engaged, leaders use their knowledge of individuals or groups to create opportunities for them to try new things and support them to believe that they can do it. Jakob remarked, “so we guide them, inspire them towards being able to do it for themselves.”

Context
Context encompasses the interpersonal environment created by, and situations used by, leaders to cultivate inspiring moments. “I think leadership is fundamental to setting the environment. I’ve never worked in an organization where I have had a lousy leader but the environment’s been great,” emphasized Emily. Table IV outlines the raw and key themes that comprise the dimensions of context.

Environment
Environment reflects the enduring atmosphere that enables leaders to cultivate situations that facilitate inspiring moments. Providing an environment where people feel valued was reinforced as a critical ongoing factor. Bob said, “you (as leader) have to create an environment where people feel comfortable expressing themselves and be confident of making a contribution without fear of being criticized, with their contribution being accepted and respected.”

Situation
Situation refers to placing the inspiree in a meaningful or important place or time that has significance for them. When the situation is right, leaders sense it or are in tune with it and can create the inspiring moment. When the situation is “right” participants

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<td>Set the climate</td>
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<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Create an atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use other things</td>
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<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tap into others</td>
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<td>Risk-taking</td>
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<td>Freedom to dream</td>
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<td><strong>Table IV.</strong></td>
<td><strong>In the zone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Situation</strong></td>
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<td>Themes comprising the</td>
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<td>context dimension</td>
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<td>In the zone</td>
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<td>Unexpected</td>
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reported a buzz, a chemistry, or a sense of excitement in the air. Jakob relayed a story of an inspiring moment where he was not aware of anything other than the pure connection between the inspiree and himself. He recalled saying to the inspiree:

If you never dare, if you never put yourself entirely out there, you hold that little bit back, you can’t fail in your own eyes because you haven’t really given it everything. For me it was important at that moment to tell her to give everything and don’t care.

Participants referred to tapping into other people rather than relying on themselves to construct inspiring situations. Participants found engaging other people to tell personal stories and share their histories, particularly with groups, were valuable contributors to the inspiring process.

Discussion
It is evident from research that inspiration occurs in a flash and is accompanied by energy and uplifting emotion. This study confirms the findings of existing research (Allport and Odbert, 1936; Hart, 1998; Hymer, 1990; Thrash and Elliott, 2003, 2004) that inspiration occurs in a moment. In the context of inspiration as a construct, participants did not consider that feeling emotionally uplifted, without any subsequent action, was a legitimate component of inspiring others. Participants were emphatic that inspiration led to action, or doing. In contrast, Thrash and Elliot (2004) and Hart (1998) suggested that inspiration manifested in a form that influences our general state of consciousness, by producing a potent emotional shift, without producing a tangible action or outcome. Although results of our study concurred with other studies (Degaard, 2005; Engen, 2005) that inspiration produces energy and excitement within others, our study found that when leaders inspire others the result was a measurable form of action or outcome. Engen (2005) and Hymer (1990) concluded that energy and confidence created within people during inspiring moments must be harnessed and channeled if inspiration is to be transferred into action. Inspiring leaders actively engage inspirees with a pathway forward to ensure action. We, therefore, discount the notion of people simply “being” inspired as a manifestation of inspiration in leadership settings. The heightening of energy and self-confidence during inspiration enables effective action.

From a leadership perspective, Sosik and Dinger (2007) found that leaders could be powerful role models and evoke emotional responses from followers that energize them to exert extra effort. Thrash and Elliot (2003) confirmed that inspiration is evoked rather than initiated through an act of will. A key focus of our research centered on whether leaders could intentionally inspire others. Results indicated that participants thought it was possible to intentionally cultivate opportunities to inspire others. Hart (1998) reiterated that although inspiration cannot be willed, it might be cultivated. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a leader could just turn up and intentionally inspire others instantaneously. We assert the primary antecedent to inspiring others is the connection between leaders and inspirees. Evidence suggests that inspiration occurs between two or more individuals by way of an interpersonal relationship (Engen, 2005; Hart, 1998; Hymer, 1990) and receptive engagement (Trash and Elliot, 2004). For intent to inspire to become reality, things must occur before, during, and after the inspiring moment (Figure 2). Although inspiration was described in research as a phenomenon that occurs in a moment, participants emphasized that inspiring others required an active process before the moment. The active process encompasses the establishment
of a strong connection between leaders and inspirees, thoughtful planning, a positive environment, and hard work. Thrash and Elliot (2003) suggested that inspiration tends not to involve pure passivity but active engagement with evocative influences. Moreover, Duke Corporate Education (2006) confirmed that, in the leadership context, inspiring others takes work.

Participants confirmed that intent to inspire others manifested through leaders cultivating opportunities for receptive engagement throughout the active process. Although creating opportunities to inspire could be planned, participants acknowledged that knowing the right moment to seize, and consequently inspire, was somewhat nebulous and was highly contingent on the context of the situation and engagement with inspirees. If leaders passively wait for inspiring moments to magically appear, those moments may never materialize or if they did, leaders would not recognize the inherent value of the moment. We believe engagement in the active process enables leaders to sense that the “right” or inspirational moment has arrived and intuitively know what to say and do in that moment. Adair (2003) confirmed that leaders could sense the inspirational moment, appreciate its significance, and make the right decisions to maximize its influence. Following the inspirational moment, leaders must assist the inspiree to take action by articulating a clear plan, steps, or direction. For example, Ochse (1989) indicated an intentionally controlled activity must follow inspiration to complete an output. Inspiring others in leadership settings requires more than leaders’ charisma.

Although Kakabadse et al. (2005) suggested that the intensity of conviction from the “evangelist” was key to leaders gaining a following, participants in our study considered themselves neither charismatic nor evangelistic. Nevertheless, all participants upon reflection conceded that they had inspired others and that the primary indicator of their inspirational influence was a tangible result or outcome. Interestingly, Weber (1947) cited in Towler (2003) first used the term “charisma” to describe a form of social authority. Charisma, in the context of our study appeared to be more about leaders’ connections with self and with others as opposed to the often-portrayed evangelist. Klein and House (1995) described charisma as a “fire” where the leader was the “spark” and
followers were “flammable material”. Conversely, participants in our study emphasized that leaders must identify the spark within people and inspire inspirees to light it themselves. Leaders who actively connect with others are more likely to inspire others than leaders who rely solely on charismatic influence. Although Shamir et al. (1993) confirmed that charisma has greatest appeal in times of crisis, should leaders be waiting for crises to inspire others? Inspiring leaders connect with people at a core values level creating high energy that propels people into action (Clawson, 2006). Participants confirmed the need for leaders to intentionally facilitate events, or leverage off them, to create inspiring moments. Thrash (2007) proposed that leaders could intend to inspire, not using self as the evocative object, but by facilitating an event that evokes inspiration (e.g. success imagery, memories of past efforts or performances). Additionally, participants indicated tapping into the stories of others is a powerful way to cultivate inspiring moments. Leadership development theory supports the move away from leader-centric perspectives (i.e. charismatic influence) by giving greater consideration to the interaction of leaders, followers, and context (Avolio, 2007). Participants proposed that leaders must foster a supportive environment (i.e. one that provides challenge, autonomy, and feelings of being valued) to inspire others. Lockwood and Kunda (2002) suggested that the situation is a key contributor to inspiring others. Our findings indicate inspiring others is more complex than simply relying on the influence of leaders’ personal charisma.

There is little doubt that visions are powerful drivers for leaders and those around them. Participants in our study reinforced the nexus between vision, at the personal and collective level, and inspiring others. A participant in Henry’s (2005) study indicated that inspiring others connected people to a vision and empowered people to believe in themselves. Although literature on transformational leadership has advocated the need for people to share the leader’s vision to be inspired (Frese et al., 2003; Kouzes and Posner, 2003) participants proposed that inspiring people required others to connect to their own visions to facilitate personal investment in a higher order vision. We propose the concept of a connected vision (Figure 3) as being central to leading to inspire others. Goleman et al. (2003) concurred with the concept by advocating a side-by-side approach where leaders and groups co-create a vision that rallies and energizes everyone. McCann et al. (2006) found that the emotional commitment an individual feels toward an organization often has less to do with the emotional connection to the leader and more to do with the connection between organizational goals and purpose and one’s own values. Gobillot (2007) suggested that inspiring moments create a “clarity point” that represents a nexus between the inspiree’s, the collective’s, and the leader’s vision. Inspiring others has less to do with sharing the leader’s vision and more about people connecting to visions by realizing their own. Vision creation should be pursued as part of the active process. Leaders must ensure visions are connected to the values and beliefs of others (Clawson, 2006) and that influences and opinions from others are incorporated into the visioning process (Kakabadse et al., 2005) to ensure the subsequent energy that visions produce attracts commitment and action (Abu-Tineh et al., 2008).

Implications
Leadership theory is on the cusp of change. There is a move away from a leader-centered paradigm toward a connecting-centered paradigm; a transition that
consistent with Loehr’s (1986) assertion that your future is determined far more by what you do than by who you are genetically. In the context of leading to inspire others, charisma is less about being an enigmatic personality and more about projecting self authentically by diagnosing needs, engaging with others, and sharing stories. The results from this study indicate that leaders can cultivate opportunities to inspire by connecting with others and providing a supportive context to create connected visions that produce energy and belief within individuals to actualize potential of self and the organization. The key implication for leaders is, having cultivated the opportunity, sensing meaningful moments and leveraging off those moments to inspire others. Leading to inspire others is a relational process that is influenced by leaders, inspirees, and prevailing circumstances.

Limitations
A limitation of the study was that the sample was confined to inspiring leaders. Our findings identified connecting as a key dimension of leading to inspire, however, the sample provided limited opportunity to understand the reciprocal nature of connecting by comparing and contrasting experiences of people who found the leaders to be inspiring. The dimension of connecting was limited to one side of the relationship (i.e. the leader’s perception). It would have been useful to investigate each element that influences inspiration (i.e. the efforts of the leader, the desires of the inspiree, the significance of the context, and the synergy between all three) concurrently.

Conclusion
Results of our study suggest the intersection between leadership theory and inspiration, as a psychological construct is a fruitful area for future research. The primary focus of our research was to understand the essence of inspiring others by investigating inspiring leaders’ personal and lived experiences of the phenomenon. Results confirmed that a connection between leaders and inspirees is paramount to the inspirational process. Nevertheless, the relational aspect of inspiring others remains
unclear because research to this point has focused on each facet of the relationship independently (i.e. the inspiree, the leader, or the environment). Participants indicated that leaders could intentionally cultivate opportunities to inspire others by engaging in an active process that included identifying inspirees’ potentials, creating supportive interpersonal environments, and leveraging off meaningful situations. Our study confirmed that inspiration occurred in a moment, contributed to achievable visions, and resulted in action. Further investigation into inspiring others, as a component of inspiration, would provide greater insight for leaders to develop and improve their capabilities to fulfill inspirational requirements bestowed upon them in leadership texts and articles.

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