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Leadership as an Art within the Context of Wicked Social Problems and Collective Leadership Streams

Jay Caulfield

Bret A. Richards

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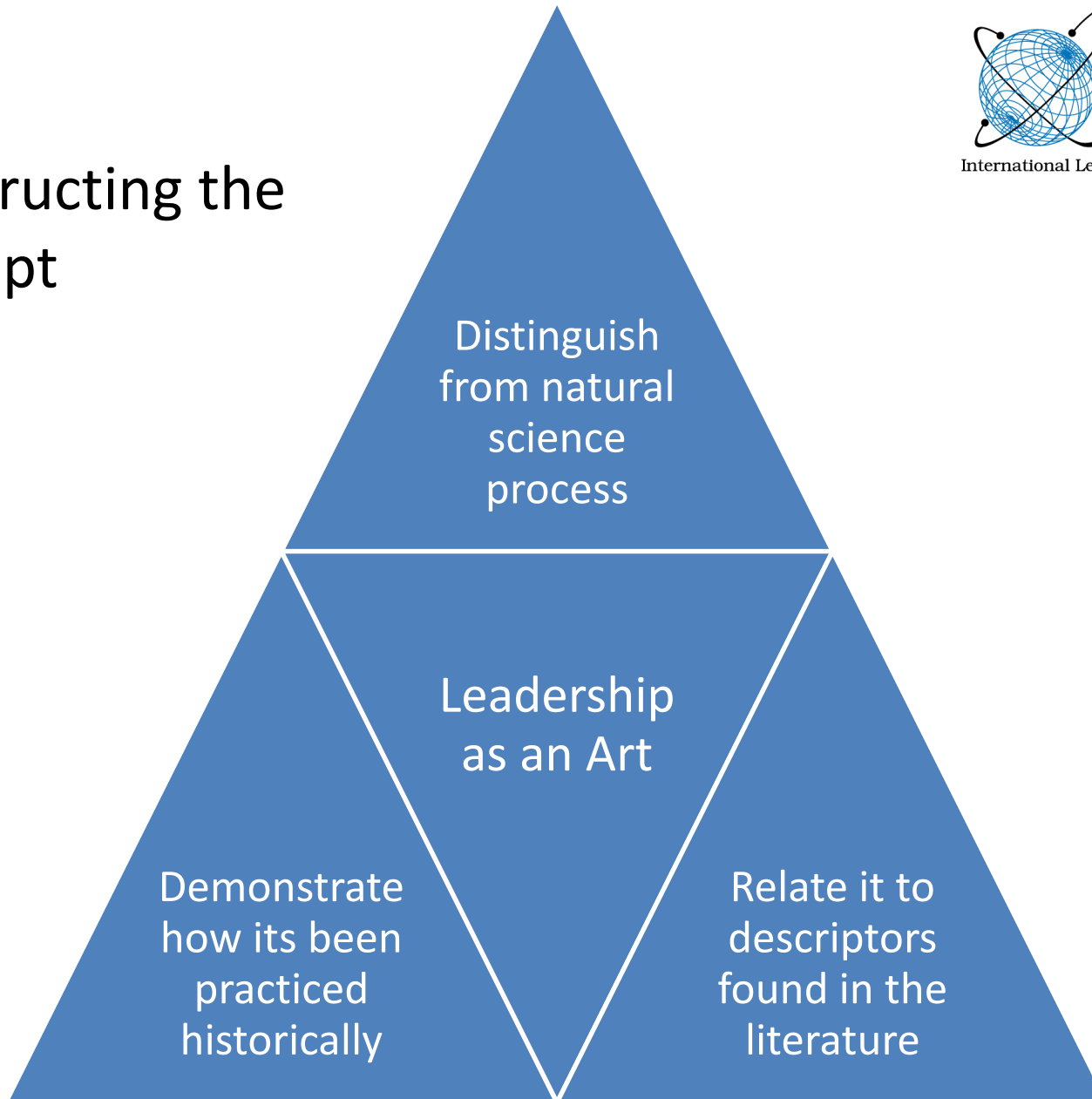
Jay Caulfield, Ph.D. & Bret Richards, Ph.D.

Aim of Paper

The aim of this conceptual paper is to construct a definition of the concept, “leadership as an art,” in the context of wicked social problems and collective leadership streams.



Constructing the concept



Contrast and Comparison

Leadership as science

- Systematic and objective inquiry leading to discovery
- Applies linear thinking by using deductive and inductive logic focusing on “what is” or “what should be”
- Reductionist approach
- Past scientific discovery
- May significantly contribute to the common good

Leadership as art

- Hermeneutical process of deciding best action to take
- Applies integrative or collective thinking by using abductive logic that focuses “what might be”
- Systems approach
- Practical wisdom
- May significantly contribute to the common good

Campbell and Mendela

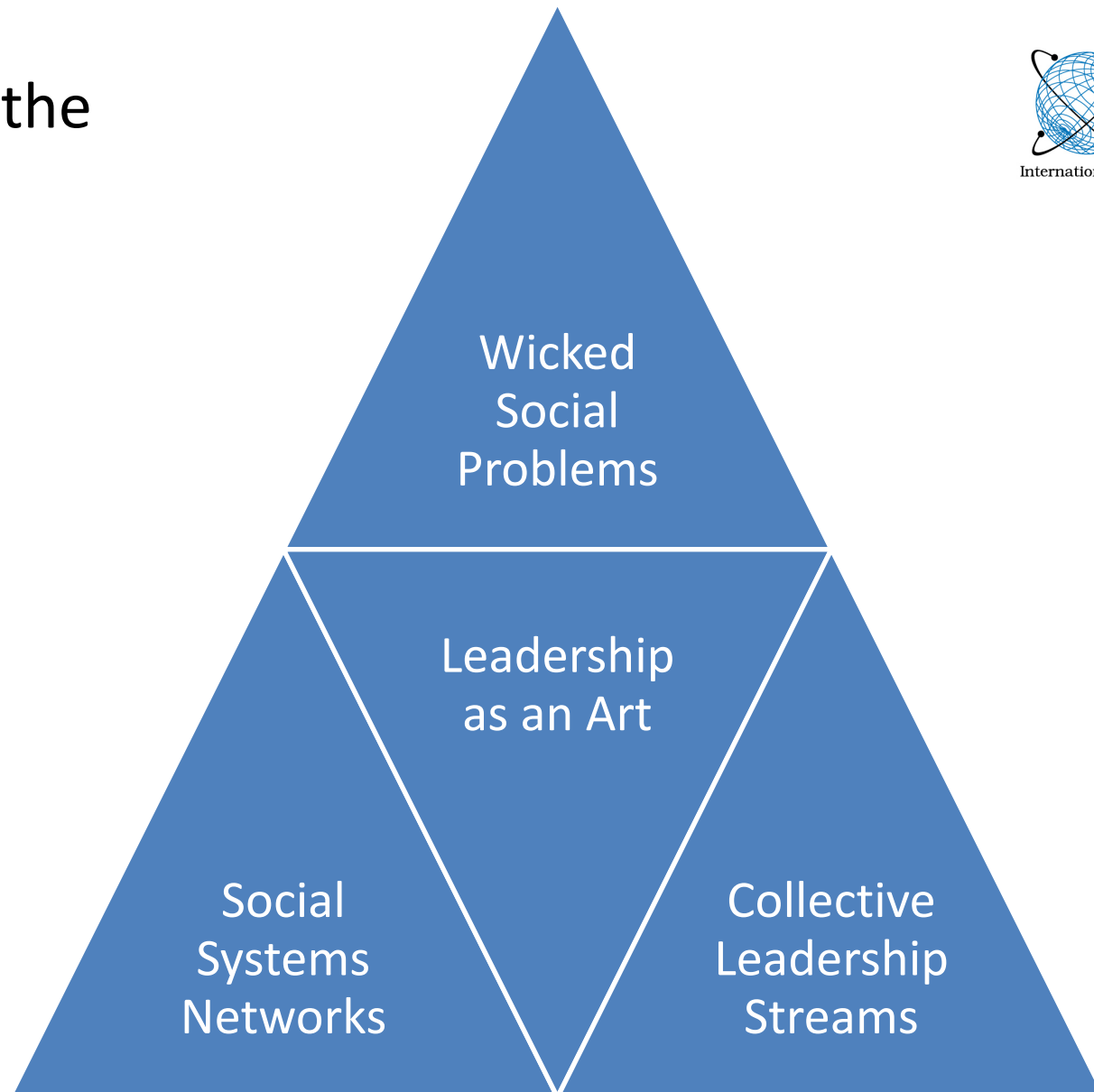
- Campbell operated from a systematic and objective reductionist approach, the preferred method for natural scientists
- His discovery of ivermectin saved millions from river blindness and led to his receiving a Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2015
- Mendela operated from a highly contextual holistic approach, the preferred method for systems thinkers
- His knowledge of how existing factions influenced each other gave him leverage to implement restorative justice at a national scale for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993

Identified descriptors for those practicing leadership as an art

- “can change our lives in ways that are as invigorating and real as being it by a wave (O’Malley, 2012)
- “finding ways to appreciate the current moment while contributing to people and actions that we sense to be toward life” (Schuyler, 2016)
- “creating a healthy world means placing values before objects and morality ahead of expediency” (Hammerschlag, 1993)
- “advocating for those unable to advocate for themselves” (Rowling, 2008)



Realizing the synergies





Wicked Social Problems

- Formulation of the problem is in itself both the problem and its resolution and “quick fixes” often make the problem worse (Rittel & Webber, 1973)
- Kolko (2012) defines a wicked problem as “a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve”
- Due to problem complexity, Grint (2005) identifies the need for collective leadership
- Requires a move from linear to social systems thinking (Norlin, et al., 2013; Stroh, 2015)
 - Knowledge gained in one social system may have significant value to other social systems
 - Means of visualizing complex problems by seeing the relationships between the parts and potentially using them to leverage resolutions
 - Often the best resolutions are achieved by an integrative thought process performed by a group of experts (collective leadership)

Leadership in the Plural (Denis et al., 2012)



- Sharing leadership for team effectiveness
 - collaboration of diverse groups across system boundaries for the purpose of resolving complex public problems for the common good (Crosby and Bryson as cited by Denis et al., 2012)
- Spreading leadership across levels over time
 - dispersion of leadership across boundaries to achieve shared outcomes
- Pooling leadership at the top to lead others
 - ‘executive constellations’, such as dyads and triads who share in the leadership of subordinate groups
- Producing leadership through interaction
 - more about participation and collectively creating vision than it is about control and authority



Definition



Practicing leadership as an art engages and unites a leadership collective in resolving a wicked social problem by constructing its definition, which leads to a compelling purpose supported by a measurable stretch goal that when skillfully and ethically pursued makes a novel and lasting contribution to humanity that is truly extraordinary.

What we discovered

- There is neither a standard template for practicing leadership as an art nor for resolving wicked problems; both are based upon practical wisdom derived from experiential learning and applied to the dynamics of the situation at hand
- Leadership as an art originates predominantly from a post-heroic perspective as the complexity of wicked social problems are best resolved through collective leadership streams, which are likely complex as well
- From a critical perspective, leadership as an art predominantly engages in power creation through developing relationships *with others* versus exerting power *over others*
- If we take the approach that leadership is a socially constructed process, then we ought to be able to explore how some leaders are able to make the world a better place more effectively than others (Grint & Jackson, 2010), and we believe that practicing leadership as an art is one of those ways
- Leadership as an art is not another leadership theory; rather, it pulls from existing theory to inform its practice; its vision and values-based practice requires a highly developed skillset to both accurately interpret dynamic social situations and courageously act in ways that lead to goal fulfillment

In Conclusion



- Descriptions of leadership as an art had a common theme: Connecting with others to make the world a better place by making novel and lasting contributions to humanity that are truly extraordinary.
- In the words of J.K. Rowling, “The power of human empathy, leading to collective action, saves lives, and frees prisoners. . . We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.”

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