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An Empirical Investigation of the Acquisition of Leadership KSAs in the U.S. Army: Implications for Veterans' Career Transitions

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Abstract

The U.S. Army incorporates an extensive leader development program as part of its everyday training. Servicemembers obtain a set of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) during their enlistment and maintain the attributes upon transitioning into the non-military workforce. Although employers in the U.S. argue the number one reason they choose to hire veterans is for their leadership skills, scholars have not examined the KSAs veterans believe they have acquired during their service. This manuscript presents findings from a qualitative study of ten Post-9/11 Army veterans who spoke about their leadership KSAs acquired while serving and their preparation for transitioning into the non-military workforce. Three themes: (1) difficulty articulating leadership KSAs, (2) impactful leadership behaviors, and (3) inadequate transition support were revealed through data analysis. The paper explores the linkages between U.S. Army leader development and career transitions, offers implications from the findings for organization management, and proposes directions for research in the area of veterans studies.

Keywords: Veterans, leadership development, KSAs, career transitions, career development, organizational learning

Introduction

Organizations are offering more hiring support for U.S. military veterans than ever before, yet many veterans struggle to secure meaningful employment post-military service (Hiring Our Heroes, 2017; Prudential Financial, 2012; Schulker, 2017; Wenger et al., 2017). One reason for veterans' post-military employment challenge lies in their struggle to communicate the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) acquired during military service. Servicemembers develop KSAs frequently cited as essential for employees in non-military organizations (Hardison et al., 2017; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kirchner, 2018). However, articulating these leadership attributes into post-military job applications has periodically been difficult for veterans (Burton Blatt Institute, 2013; Hardison et al., 2017; Prudential Financial, 2012). At the same time, organizations seeking to hire veterans face a similar challenge in understanding how former servicemembers may successfully transfer their military-acquired KSAs (Prudential Financial, 2012). More specifically, although employers have increased their efforts to employ veterans, human resource managers continue struggling to effectively assess veterans' leadership KSAs (Lewis, 2013).

The knowledge gap regarding veterans' leadership KSAs may stem from the percentage of the population who have served. Due to the low number of U.S. citizens serving in the military (less than one percent), it is difficult for companies to accurately identify and assess the training provided to U.S. servicemembers (Pew Research Center, 2011). Additionally, military training is often portrayed with no perceivable connections to the business world. Kintzle and Castro (2018) postulated that veterans go through three phases in their transition out of the military, leading to changes in veterans' assumptions, relationship, work context, personal, and social identity. Ultimately, these changes can make transitioning out of the military into civilian contexts a challenging experience (Kintzle & Castro, 2018).

Compounding the issue is that much of the research on veteran transitions relates to psychological issues, substance abuse, employment challenges, and family issues, while few studies explore the potentially positive and unique set of leadership KSAs associated with a servicemember (Neill-Harris et al., 2016). Stigmas and knowledge gaps, place pressure on veterans to readily articulate how military service has contributed to their readiness for post-military employment.

To that end, this research examined U.S. Army training to help identify the leadership KSAs developed through military service. Furthermore, the study examined veterans' preparation for career transitions in civilian life upon exiting military. Two research questions guided the study:

1. *How do Post-9/11 U.S. Army veterans describe the leadership KSAs developed during military service?*
2. *How have the acquired leadership KSAs prepared them for post-military employment?*

Background

The conclusion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to an annual transition of 200,000 U.S. servicemembers, including 90,000 per year from the Army dating back to 2013 (Wenger et al., 2017). The number of transitioning servicemembers has led to increased awareness of challenges faced by veterans post military-service, with employment frequently a top concern (Maury, Stone, & Roseman, 2016). While many reasons contribute toward employment being a challenge, finding jobs that align well with skills acquired during military service ranks highest (Maury et al., 2016). The misalignment is particularly interesting, considering the frequent argument made by employers about the positive attributes veterans bring to the workplace (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). Although veterans' perceptions of their readiness for post-military employment have improved, the skills gap remains a major issue (Monster, 2016).

Researchers have only recently started exploring veterans' leadership KSAs. Hardison et al. (2017), examined the attributes acquired through Army training and highlighted specifically the various soft skills, including leadership, teamwork, effective communication, and supervision. Their findings provided a comprehensive assessment of the non-technical skills servicemembers acquire during military training. Wenger et al. (2017), conducted surveys with 827 Army soldiers from the ten largest job specialties and coded responses to identify non-military jobs that may align with military occupational specialties. Their study offers career development support, but it does not address veterans' perceived leadership attributes.

Servicemembers undergo an extensive training regimen throughout their service, which includes the acquisition of leadership KSAs, such as situational awareness, teamwork, integrity, respect, discipline, adaptability, perseverance, and interpersonal communication (Department of the Army, 2015; Veestraeten, Kyndt, & Dochy, 2014)—many of which are desirable attributes for today's global organizations (Brungardt, 2011). For example, the top five reasons Coca-Cola Company hires veterans are their (1) leadership and decision-making; (2) technical and people skills; (3) character, mission-first attitude, and relentless work ethic; (4) sense of duty and commitment to common good; and (5) global perspective (Rains, 2008). Additionally, employers seek to hire veterans for their presentation and cross-cultural skills, quick thinking abilities, preparation, flexibility, ability to innovate, agility, and insight (Rains, 2008). Harrell and Berglass (2012) found employers most commonly cited veterans' leadership and teamwork skills, including motivating others, dependability, and decision-making as the reason they hire veterans.

The leadership skills described often align with attributes of desirable employees. Because of their training and service, the leadership KSAs acquired by veterans are generally retained and may be transferable into non-military careers (Hardison et al., 2017; Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). Although veterans may be hired for multiple reasons, none appear more frequently than their prescribed leadership KSAs.

Leadership Attribute Theories

Leadership-related attributes have been a topic of scholarly interest since the *great man theory* (Galton, 1869). At the time, it was believed people were born with a set of traits that made them great leaders (Northouse, 2017). Further exploration of leaders' attributes did not expand until Stoghill's (1948) *traits theory* and Katz's (1955) *skills theory* were proposed. Since then, dozens of leadership attribute studies have transpired. More recently, leadership has been described as a collection of predetermined attributes or soft skills maintained by the leader (see Ariratana, Sirisookslip, & Ngang, 2015; Boyle & Robinson, 2013; Brungardt, 2011; Rao, 2014; Riggio & Tan, 2014). Though early scholars believed people were born leaders, the paradigm has shifted, with general acceptance that people can be developed and acquire the skills required to be effective leaders.

As Boyle and Robinson (2013) noted, leadership involves both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, which consist of many defining attributes. Ariratana, Sirisookslip, and Ngang (2015), defined these attributes as "related to human skills focusing on the competency in working with other individuals" (p. 332). Hardison et al. (2017) added leadership skills are the essential non-technical skills veterans offer employers not tied to a specific job. While various leadership theories, such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) and authentic leadership (Barnard, 1948), have identified attributes of leaders, research has periodically suggested traits of effective leaders are difficult to distinguish from traits of non-leaders (Gnambs, 2017). Extending further, Crosbie (2005) noted all organizational members need leadership KSAs to effectively conduct their jobs. For military veterans, leader development is an emphasis throughout their term of service, which has successfully prepared many past servicemembers for transition into civilian jobs and careers (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017).

Significance

Although veterans are often credited as having many leadership attributes making them desirable job applicants, many former servicemembers have struggled to demonstrate how their military training aligns with post-military employment (Hardison et al., 2017; Kirchner & Akdere, 2017; Kirchner, 2018; Kirchner & O'Connor, 2018; Wenger et al., 2017). Considering 44% of active duty and 34% of reservists are under the age of 25, many soldiers enlist in the Army soon after graduating high school and never needed a civilian resume (Department of Defense, 2015).

When applying for their first non-military jobs, veterans may have difficulty outlining their military training and corresponding KSAs on a resume designed for civilian employment (Monster, 2016). In other words, even though employers cite their leadership skills as a reason for hiring, veterans still struggle to describe particular leadership KSAs that align with the job they are seeking. This knowledge gap likely contributes to veterans' career transition struggles and begs attention from both veterans and employers to more-clearly understand the leadership KSAs veterans possess.

Many of the skills attributed to veterans are in high demand for all employees of non-military organizations. Since the 1990s, organizations have increased demand for their employees to have leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, decision-making, diversity, and communication skills (Brungardt, 2011; Carnevale et al., 1990; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Dwyer, Millett, & Payne, 2006; Hart Research Associates, 2015). These skills are considered critical to workplace effectiveness and remain of substantial interest to employers (Brungardt, 2011). As Development Dimensions International (2014) reported, leadership development remains a top priority in organizations because of the need for organization leaders and strengthening demand for leadership pipelines. Veterans' prescribed leadership attributes suggest supporting servicemember transitions may be beneficial for both military-affiliated employees and the organizations who hire them.

In recognition of issues faced upon exiting the military, the Army's Soldier for Life-Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP) was created to aid soldiers in their transition and is a mandatory

requirement for officers and enlisted personnel all who have completed at least 180 days of continuous service (Army University, 2017). While completing SFL-TAP, soldiers learn about financial planning, education benefits, skills translations, job applications, and resume development—all of which can be started up to 18 months prior to transitioning servicemembers (Army University, 2017). The program has been a substantial investment from the Army and exposes transitioning soldiers to career options they may never have considered. The newer Career Skills Program (CSP) is an extension of SFL-TAP, offering soldiers training in soft and technical skills, and provides them opportunities to receive certificates deemed essential in various industries (Hale, 2017). However, due to the relative infancy of the program and limited number of soldiers who can participate—2,600 in 2016—concerns persist from veterans about skills misalignment with civilian jobs—even while being recognized by employers as having leadership KSAs. Such recognition suggests a gap in veterans' own understanding and recognition on their leadership attributes.

Alignment between leadership skills sought by employers and those acquired through military training is clear and worthy of further exploration. This study continues recent research by empowering Post-9/11 U.S. Army veterans to identify—without prompt—the leadership KSAs acquired during military service. By understanding Army veterans' experiences and perception of their leadership KSAs, career counselors and job recruiters may develop new frameworks to assist veterans during the military transition.

Methodology

This phenomenological study was conducted to understand veterans' leadership KSAs and explore how the Army has prepared servicemembers for their post-military transition. Phenomenological research helps researchers understand a collective's lived experience by identifying commonalities (Creswell, 2007). Through an online autobiography and face to face interviews, ten Post-9/11 U.S. Army veterans shared their lived experiences with Army training and military transitions.

Sampling Strategy

Participants were enrolled at a large, urban university and received an email request from the campus' student veteran listserv to participate in the study. More than 1,000 students with a military connection received the notification through two emails sent during a three-week period in December 2015. The request included information about participation benefits and risks, as well as the study's intent and participation criteria. Participants were offered \$50 and were free to withdraw at any time. Although qualitative research is not intended to generalize across a population, a purposive, homogeneous sample was used to ensure at least half of the Army's ten job categories were represented while constraining participation to those with relevant experience (Klenke, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Purposive sampling also contributed toward obtaining participation with veterans who shared relevant experiences and who could communicate their lived experiences with developing leadership KSAs (Klenke, 2008). Participants' military occupation specialties (MOS) are illustrated in Table 1 (next page), along with a complete participant profile. The Army has around 190 MOSs that represent the jobs and corresponding responsibilities of servicemembers (Powers, 2018). Pseudonyms for participants are used throughout data reporting to maintain confidentiality. Each column represents a pre-military leadership autobiography question and corresponding attribute of the participating veteran.

Table 1 (next page) is organized with pseudonyms for each participant in column one, followed by: veterans' beliefs about their already being leaders prior to serving (Column B), exposure to leadership development pre-military (Column C), number of siblings (Column D), enlistment age

(Column E), year of enlistment (Column F), years of active duty (Column G), amount of time deployed (Column H), military occupation specialty (Column I), highest rank attained during service (Column J), and the job category held in the Army (Column K). The number of siblings question (Column D) was requested to see if a relationship would emerge between veteran's pre-military leadership perceptions and family size, which did not result.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Dennis	Yes	JROTC	5+	19-20	2009	4	One year	11B	Corporal	Combat
Chris	No	None	2	19-20	2009	3	One 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	Three years	91B	Specialist	Legal & Law
Mark	Y/N	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	One year	74D	Corporal	Intel & Combat

Data Collection

Participants completed a 20-question pre-military leadership autobiography, which consisted of both open and closed questions, using Qualtrics software. The leadership autobiographies were structured to help the researchers understand veterans' experiences prior to enlisting in the military to include: family background, demographical information at age of enlistment, influences on leadership beliefs prior to military service, and job responsibilities while serving. The list of 20 questions can be found in Appendix A. Autobiographies were coded using NVivo software and demographic information sorted. Upon completing the autobiography, an in-person, semi-structured interview about the veterans' lived experiences with developing leadership KSAs in the Army was completed. Interviews ranged from 37 minutes to 76 minutes, with an average length of 51 minutes spent responding to questions. Interviews were audio recorded with permission from participants. Fourteen questions, along with follow-up questions, related to Army leader development, acquisition of leadership KSAs and career transitions were asked and are included in Appendix B. Development of interview questions was guided through literature provided by the Department of the Army on

leadership domains, training, and leadership expectations as the terminology was expected to be familiar to participating veterans (Department of the Army, 2015).

Data Analysis

Interview data was transcribed within three days and uploaded into NVivo software for coding. Coding is a process of reading and developing categories from data that seems important to the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Researcher one began coding by scrutinizing the first four autobiographies and interviews for areas of interest. Inductive coding was used during data analysis to allow themes to emerge from the raw data, and reduced the likelihood of preconceived notions influencing the findings. A total of four read-throughs of each manuscript were completed during coding dictionary development, with keywords, experiences, repeated terms, and important figures being highlighted. Thirty-eight codes were developed through the process and helped reduce data into distinct, organized chunks (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). Twenty-two of the codes related to leadership KSAs and career transitions. The data was further scrutinized and reduced to seven categories during a period of reflection for both researchers (Moustakas, 1994). The seven categories were then analyzed collaboratively between researchers to make sense of veterans' responses and ultimately reveal prevailing themes. Due to similarities in participant responses, as reported in the findings, new or contradictory information about leadership KSAs or career transitions was unlikely had we conducted additional interviews. As such, the decision was made to end data collection at ten participants. Pseudonyms are used when presenting the findings to maintain participant confidentiality. Data analysis concluded with three themes related to leadership KSAs and career transitions: (a) difficulty articulating leadership KSAs, (b) impactful leadership behaviors, and (c) inadequate career transition support.

Data trustworthiness is an important issue in qualitative research—particularly because reality is influenced by both the inquirer and participant (Anney, 2014). Credibility, a component of data trustworthiness, relates to the confidence placed in the study's findings (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Each of which were prioritized throughout the study. To enhance trustworthiness, the researchers have provided a thick description of the methodology including a step-by-step outline for future replication (Anney, 2014). At the same time, a code-recode strategy was used to allow the researchers to identify codes prior to re-coding the transcripts for consistency. Lastly, the researchers analyzed the coding dictionary to identify inconsistencies in the findings (Anney, 2014). Table 2 (next page) outlines identified outcomes from the data analysis process, which led to three themes. The first column, "Codes", outlines the 22 codes related to leadership KSAs and career transitions. The second column, "Categories", denotes how the 22 codes were chunked into the seven categories (in parentheses) previously discussed. The third column, "Themes", is a visual portrayal of how the seven categories were ultimately condensed into the three overarching study themes. Categories one through three aligned with theme one, four and five with theme two, and categories six and seven with theme three.

Table 2
Emergent Themes from Coding Dictionary

Codes	Categories	Themes
Drill sergeants Worst Army leader Effective teacher Other influential leaders	(1) Influencers on leadership	Impactful leadership behaviors (1-3)
Direct Performing Learn leadership jobs Tough great leadership Protecting	(2) Approaches to leading	
Failing Never great leader Understand why tough/yelling Fear	(3) Leadership Perspectives	Difficulty distinguishing leadership KSAs (4-5)
KSAs same	(4) KSAs same	
Respect	(5) Attributes	
Physical fitness		
Standards		
Mission		Inadequate Transition Support (6-7)
Army LD feedback unclear	(6) Army LD feedback unclear	
Contribution Leading civilians Transition	(7) Post-military impact	

Findings

After analyzing and coding the data in the study, as previously stated, the researchers identified three themes pertaining to leadership KSAs: (a) difficulty articulating leadership KSAs, (b) impactful leadership behaviors, and (c) inadequate transition support. Each of the 10 participating veterans described effective leadership, but struggled to identify, distinguish, and articulate their leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities developed through their military service. Finally, although participants believed they acquired leadership KSAs during their service, the Army's transition assistance program did not fully-prepare them for their move from the military into civilian jobs.

Difficulty articulating leadership KSAs

The first theme revealed significant challenges associated with identifying leadership KSAs. Participants were asked about the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired through their military service. Dennis' response to the question about knowledge gained was, "What do you mean by knowledge specifically? Do you mean like classroom? Like overall? What do you mean?" Mike had a

similar reaction, “Are you sure none of these questions are the same cause I’m answering it mostly the same way?” Jan, referring to feelings about time spent viewing PowerPoint slides during training, said, “That is probably all the knowledge that I have that pertains to that.” Leo was the only participant to have a response of more than four sentences, with half providing a three sentence or shorter response, suggesting participants had difficulty responding to the questions.

When prodded to describe knowledge gained through their service, six participants spoke about working or communicating with a group of diverse people. Andrea began, “I would say just observing and knowing how to work with others, and how to lead them, and how to just get them to have one goal.” Carol added, “I guess the knowledge of how the Army works has definitely contributed because I feel like it has also helped me in my civilian life as far as leadership, like how to recognize people of authority.” Mike contributed, “I have respect for certain people even though I give them a hard time because I know their position and the way that they sound.” The other participants mentioned knowing how to step back and observe, valuing the leadership development process, and understanding the academic side of things.

The question about skills acquisition began to elicit stronger reactions, particularly from Mike, “I also know respect level...Jesus Christ! These are the same [questions]!” Eight of the participants related their skills acquired to the knowledge gained. Six identified their knowledge gained was in their ability to communicate or work with others. Of those six, five also identified communication and ability to work with others as their skills acquired. Brian identified knowledge as the learning related to books and skills gained as “the hands-on stuff.” Mark spoke of his improved writing as the skill gained through service, and Rachel added, “Working with others. I kind of beat a dead horse with that but self-wise I’ve definitely learned some skills.” The similarity in responses continued when participants addressed their acquired abilities.

Each of the 10 participants referenced their knowledge and/or skills gained when describing acquired abilities from military service. Chris was representative of the majority when he spoke of the knowledge he gained in communicating with others, the skill he gained socializing with others, and his ability to communicate effectively. Jan focused more-closely on how KSAs related to teaching others. She received knowledge about the ineffectiveness of PowerPoint presentations, gained the skills needed to be a creative classroom trainer, and acquired the ability to connect with people when teaching. Rachel said she had an increased ability to think on her feet.

Summarizing the finding, participants ultimately preferred to either combine KSAs into a single response or argue there was no difference between the terms. Jan mentioned abilities were, “Probably about the same thing. Skills and abilities are different but they’re kind of the same to me. I am able to connect with people and I’m able to help teach people different things.” Brian had a near identical response, “I would say that some of the abilities would be...those abilities and skills, they just seem to really...I know they’re different though. Maybe the ability to...abilities and skills are the same thing. Come back to that one.” The similarity of responses for questions related to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities demonstrated an inability to distinguish the terms.

Impactful leadership behaviors

Though identifying military-acquired leadership KSAs was a challenge, the participating veterans provided numerous examples of effective leadership behaviors. The identified actions were discussed from both observed behaviors and participant perceptions of their own approaches that contribute toward them being effective leaders. These areas can be separated into two primary impactful leadership behaviors: mission focused (path-goal leadership) and demonstrated care of subordinates (servant leadership).

Mission-focused (Path-goal leadership)

The participants discussed the role leaders play—whether through observation or personal opinion—in developing soldiers’ leadership KSAs and mission readiness. They argued soldier readiness is a vital responsibility of leaders throughout subordinates’ enlistment. As Chris outlined, “the role of leaders is to help their soldiers succeed, and, as a team, complete the overall mission, whatever it is. To help them mentally, physically, spiritually, everything.”

Dennis added:

You cannot be a leader in any sense of the word and have people respect you if you’re not willing to do the job yourself, or if you can’t do it better than everyone else underneath you. And that was always my motto as a leader. Always. So, I would say, not only is it good because it gives you time to do it, I would say it’s also good because it gives you time to develop your own leadership, whether you’re receiving leadership or giving leadership out to other people.

Leo noted:

Two of the most effective leaders I have seen, and they just weren’t effective with people who thought like them or accepted their leadership style as something similar to theirs, they motivated the infantry, they motivated the S1 (administrators) guys and gals. They motivated the tankers, they motivated the cook, everyone, and it’s because they were very flexible, and the things that they said was [sic] easy to digest and easy to believe, and you felt confident, and you felt like these things are being said because, A, my interest isn’t mine, B, the interest of my battle plan isn’t mine, and C, it’s about the mission. You didn’t feel like ego was involved, you didn’t feel like it was something that was going to put your life in danger in such a way that it wasn’t reasonable.

Mike contributed:

SSG He knew everything down to the T, with just about everything that could go on, he didn’t hesitate. He was like, he was by far, he might have been really hard and kind of an asshole, but he had his reasons, and he knew his shit, and he excelled in rank real quick because of that, because he knew exactly what to do and he didn’t hesitate and that’s why I respected him a lot.

In total, more than 300 references to “training” or “development” were shared by the participants, while seven participants referenced the “mission” 33 times. Each reference highlights the importance these veterans found in leaders being a vital part of the Army’s mission. At the same time, participants outlined a softer side of effective leadership.

Demonstrated care for subordinates (Servant leadership)

The military is often perceived as an environment heavily reliant on yelling and discipline—each of which can be accurate at times; however, participants in this study directly addressed the importance of taking care of their fellow soldiers. All of the participants discussed instances of protecting and caring for soldiers, as either leaders or subordinates to other leaders. Andrea stated, “There were a couple of best Army leaders...but I would say the ones that I most looked up to, they were the same to the effect of how much they cared...as far as compassion.” Chris noted, “It was my team. It wasn’t my team leader’s job to look after us. It was me. It was my job. It was my job to protect these guys, to lead these guys.”

Mark shared:

In Afghanistan, our guys had to pull tower guard—all of our privates—and we switched one week around tower guard and one week around hot guns (tanks). We were ready to shoot the

cannons at any time given. You're up there, laid your (tanks) every morning. During the week, it was like the first week, my platoon sergeant made all of the specialists and below (lowest-ranking) pull tower guard. After the first week, I said no, because I was in the hot gun first week, second week I came in, I made up the schedule for guard shifts and I put myself in there, and all my Joes (privates) kind of looked at me like what the f*** are you doing? You're an NCO, you shouldn't be doing this. It was like, no this is how a leader should be. I am going to give you guys a couple of extra of sleep and (I) lose a couple of hours of sleep — no big deal. And I feel like I gained the respect and the hard work that I got out of my guys because of that.

Brian contributed:

I'd say the first time was probably, I was still an E3 (private first class), but the new soldiers that were coming into our platoon, it was our first day there. And sure, they have leaders and everything, but I would go to 'em "and if you need anything, just come to me. You know, I can help you out with whatever you might need." Just making sure that everybody coming in is squared away. Now whether it was my responsibility or not, I didn't really care. I just wanted to make sure people were...ready. Just had all their stuff. Didn't want anybody to be needing.

Jan shared her experience:

At one point I let it go to my head. I remember that, because I would unnecessarily gather the squad leaders to talk about things and then somebody said "you need to give them a break, calm down." So then I calmed down. But I felt really good about the way I was leading because I genuinely cared about the soldiers and their problems and I tried my best to help them and resolve any issues, and I just listened. So that's why I feel like I was a really good leader.

Though the participants struggled to articulate their leadership KSAs, they had no struggle outlining instances where they either observed effective leadership or providing examples of their own effectiveness as a leader. This dichotomy was enhanced when it came time for these veterans to transition out.

Inadequate transition support

The third theme suggested that SFL-TAP program did not fully-prepare participants for a successful transition into civilian employment. Participants provided extensive, negative feedback about program and shared their concerns about its effectiveness. Only one participant spoke favorably of his preparation for the civilian workplace as a result of SFL-TAP. Of the nine, eight rated the Army's transition program as poor, fair, or ineffective.

Brian described:

They tried to show you ways, "oh, you see, if you're a squad leader here [then] that goes to shift manager." It was this really weird way of trying to decipher the military language into a resume and it's still hard sometimes when you're talking to someone about it. You know you say one thing and, "in civilian, this means this."

Mark added:

Horrible. Like a 1 out of 10. They don't prepare you for civilian life at all. Granted, you go through classes to do the resume and this is what you can get when you get out and they explain all of the benefits that you can get, but they don't do a very good job of transitioning

people at all. It's a huge downfall. They don't try to set you up with jobs, nothing. This is what you get, and pretty much, see ya.

Leo stated:

I would say poor because in my experience, and the experience of dozens if not hundreds of other individuals...in a lot of ways, the Army just dropped the ball...the Army just doesn't transition these individuals to be hard chargers or to be totally confident in that they can transfer their training and their experiences from the Army into the civilian sector or into the higher education sector.

Dennis summed up the program:

Nonexistent. They're trying but its non-existent. They'd be better off not doing anything than doing what they are right now. They do a lot of classes...It's something like 80 mandatory hours now when I was going through ACAP (Army Career and Alumni Program – now “Transition Assistance Program”) of classroom time, resume building, stuff like that. And it's a great thought, but you're dealing with soldiers, veterans...You need to teach someone how to be a veteran and how to live like a veteran outside of the military and the military really drops the ball on that on.

Unlike many of other interview questions, participant responses were often lengthy when discussing the transition out of the Army. This finding, along with the veterans' struggle to differentiate leadership KSAs, offers significant support from previous research suggesting former servicemembers have the necessary attributes to be successful in the workforce but are under-prepared to adequately articulate them into civilian settings.

Discussion

This study revealed three findings about veterans' leadership KSAs development and their preparation for transitioning into a non-military work environment – each of which were supported by current research. The veterans' struggles to articulate their leadership KSAs supports previous employer claims about veterans' inability to describe and relate their attributes to non-military jobs (Hardison et al., 2017; Monster, 2016; Prudential Financial, 2012). Hardison et al. (2017), and Wenger et al. (2017), identified a plethora of veterans' leadership attributes that are transferable to the non-military workforce through (a) examining military job descriptions, (b) asking veterans to prioritize particular tasks and skills, and (c) comparing military assignments with non-military job positions. However, the KSAs outlined by veterans were neither exhaustive nor reflective of those reported by employers (Harrell & Berglass, 2012; Monster, 2016). As such, veterans may be limited in their ability to successfully identify and obtain meaningful employment, which allows them to apply their leadership KSAs gained through military training in non-military organizations.

Although discussions related to leadership KSAs were limited, the participants had little trouble highlighting examples of impactful leadership behaviors, which emphasized caring for subordinates and completing the mission. The Department of the Army's (2015) *Field Manual 6-22 Leader Development* provides several chapters devoted to the development of self and others, as part of unit preparation. At the same time, leaders are expected to be role models, mentors, coaches, trust-builders, and create a positive environment for their subordinates (2015). The finding on the impactful leadership behaviors suggests the Army's leader development program is successful in developing the outlined leadership competencies, regardless of servicemembers' awareness of their own development. Still, the participants overwhelmingly felt underprepared to successfully transition into the civilian workforce.

The third finding suggests SFL-TAP has not adequately addressed veterans' concerns about transitioning into a non-military career and supports existing literature on career transition struggles.

Much of the SFL-TAP program is employability training, yet participants expressed frustration from their experience. A Google search of the SFL-TAP program revealed multiple articles and blogs written by veterans expressing similar displeasure and disappointment with the program (Nussbaumer, 2015; Pritts, 2015). Perhaps not surprising, employers have expressed similar concerns in former servicemembers' non-military career readiness (Prudential Financial, 2012). The findings of this study offer HR professionals with an insight about veterans' acquisition of leadership KSAs and challenges they face in transition from the Army into civilian professional life.

Implications

Army leaders may consider further exploration into how SFL-TAP supports the career readiness of veterans after service. Although the Career Skills Program (CSPs) have substantially reduced unemployment benefits paid to veterans, former servicemembers may be better prepared to compete in a highly-competitive job markets by incorporating discussions in SFL-TAP about the leadership KSAs often acquired by servicemembers (Army University, 2017). Army HR personnel may consider adding leadership KSAs to soldier job descriptions and even developing a *career e-portfolio* for soldiers to help them articulate their service experiences and associated leadership KSAs into civilian careers. Whereas a search of federal or non-federal jobs often includes a section for KSAs, the job descriptions of various military occupation specialties do not include such sections. A search of 11B Infantryman position description revealed a list of four "helpful skills": (a) willingness to accept challenges, (b) ability to perform well under stress, (c) physically and mentally in shape, and (d) ability to work as a team member (Go Army, 2016). For a veteran attempting to secure employment in a non-military organization, these four skills are insufficient when preparing for a competitive labor market.

Veterans transitioning from the military can also benefit from articulation of leadership KSAs they acquired after reflecting on their training experiences. As Kirchner and O'Connor (2018) outlined, Army leaders may consider incorporating reflection exercises into their education programs. While most veterans highlighted the ability to communicate and work as part of a team, none identified at least one unique KSA gained through service. The challenge to identify leadership KSAs is particularly surprising considering Army doctrine, including Army Regulation 600-100 Army Profession and Leadership Policy and Field Manual 6-22 Leader Development (Department of the Army, 2015; Department of the Army, 2017), specifically outline expected leadership attributes of soldiers. Career development programs, whether in military or non-military organizations, may be enhanced by adding discussions about leadership KSAs and how they are applicable to civilian employment.

Career transitions from the military to non-military organizations can be supported through skills alignment resources, such as the O*Net. In the U.S., the O*Net is the most extensive resource for civilian occupations and provides information about hundreds of jobs for prospective employees (Wegner et al., 2017). Users can browse occupations by clusters, economy sector, industry, zone, outlook, and STEM (O*Net Online, n.d.). Jobs are continuously evaluated through employee surveys to ensure accuracy in the system (Wegner, et al., 2017). For each position, the site offers extensive information including required tasks, skills, knowledge, abilities, and work activities (O*Net Online, n.d.). Servicemembers transitioning out may consider using this resource as an aid to identify jobs that enable application of previously acquired leadership KSAs.

Limitations

Limitations in this study should be considered with the findings. First, as this was a phenomenological study exploring shared experiences, the findings should not be considered

generalizable across all Army veterans who transition from the military. Instead, the findings offer insights into how the participants viewed their training experience and corresponding leadership KSAs acquired which can help guide future empirical studies. Furthermore, this research involved exclusively veterans who never completed one of the Army's leader development courses, thus potentially limiting participants' understanding of their leadership KSAs.

In addition, the consistent feedback about ACAP and SFL-TAP should not be used to suggest the training itself is entirely ineffective and does not contribute toward veteran career transitions. Participants were insistent about their displeasure for SFL-TAP; however, the program continues to undergo changes and the CSP has resulted in better than 90% job placement rates for veterans who completed the program (Hale, 2017). As such, early findings from the CSP suggest an overwhelmingly positive impact on veteran career transitions. A final, particularly important limitation to this study, is that although the participants struggled to articulate their leadership KSAs, a host of factors contribute toward veteran career transition issues (Kirchner, 2018a). As outlined, culture change, lost sense of purpose, underemployment, lack of technical skills/misalignment of skills, and other elements also play a role in the challenges faced by veterans upon transitioning out; thus, a clearer understanding of the KSAs they possess is only one component of improving veteran career transitions (Kirchner & O'Connor, 2018b, Maury et al., 2016; Monster, 2016, Prudential Financial, 2012).

Future Research

This study revealed multiple avenues for future research. First, further empirical research is needed to understand how veterans' understanding of the leadership KSAs possessed influences job attainment, satisfaction, and retention. Second, KSAs are generally bundled together but considered distinct employee attributes. Non-military position descriptions often do not distinguish KSAs, which may impede veteran job searches. Researchers may consider exploring the impact of adding military-affiliated attributes and competencies to non-military employer job postings on veterans' job attainment, satisfaction, and retention. Researchers can also assess the impact of distinguishing and explaining KSAs on job descriptions—particularly as they relate to qualified applicants, as veterans may find the job-search process less challenging with clearer requirements. In addition, comparative studies between soldiers who completed only SFL-TAP and soldiers who completed a CSP may reveal additional impacts on veterans' job attainment.

Conclusion

Veterans are often described as leaders, but as found in this study, they periodically struggle to detail the leadership KSAs they possess. The struggle can impede veteran career transitions and impair employers' ability to successfully recruit and hire former servicemembers. Strengthening the knowledge veterans have about their leadership KSAs appears essential to improving transition experiences (Neill-Harris et al., 2016). The years of professional and extensive training provided by the armed forces should be further explored to more appropriately align servicemember leadership KSAs with civilian work. Although the mission of the U.S. Army is to develop and deliver a dominant force for the country and its allies, the training experienced by soldiers also prepares them for non-military jobs after completion of their service. By re-visioning elements of Army training and transition programs, veterans may develop a deeper understanding and awareness of their experiences and attributes and leave the military with additional clarity about their ability to contribute in non-military workplace settings.

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Appendix A: Pre-military Leadership Autobiography Interview Questions

1. How old were you when you enlisted?
2. How many siblings did you have prior to enlisting?
3. Had you participated in a structured leadership development program prior to enlisting?
4. What year did you enlist in the U.S. Army?
5. How many years did you serve?
6. How many years were on active duty?
7. Did you deploy overseas? If so, for how many total months?
8. What was your military occupational specialty?
9. What was the highest rank you achieved in the Army?
10. What unit were you with?
11. How would you describe your experience as a leader prior to enlisting in the U.S. Army?
12. Would you consider yourself someone who was a leader prior to enlisting? Why or why not?
13. How did family impact your beliefs or perceptions of leadership pre-military?
14. How did friends impact your beliefs or perceptions of leadership pre-military?
15. Were you ever employed before enlisting in the Army and, if so, what was your position(s) and the company you worked for?
16. If you answered “no” to question 15, skip to question 17. If you answered “yes” to question 15, how did serving as an employee contribute to your leadership development?
17. Were you someone who earned good grades in high school?
18. How would you describe your involvement in after school activities? Were you involved in multiple clubs or sports? Why or why not?
20. Were there any additional influences in your life, prior to enlistment, that contributed to who you are as a leader today?

Appendix B: Acquisition of Leadership KSAs during Military Service Interview Questions

1. Was there ever an instance while you were serving that you thought you were being a great leader? What factors contributed to that belief?
2. Was there ever an instance while you were serving that you thought you were failing as a leader? What factors contributed to that belief?
3. Leaders are found at all three levels of leadership currently identified by the Army—direct, organizational, and strategic—and assume progressively broader responsibilities. Direct level leaders are the first-line leaders and are representative of the direct leadership of others. The positions are filled by junior leaders learning how to plan tasks and activities, understand organizational constructs, and how to interact with others. Please describe direct level leadership from your experience.
4. Army doctrine argues Army leaders develop soldiers through three domains: institutional or Army-created training often in classrooms; operational or training while performing the job; and self-development or additional training sought by Army soldiers outside of the military. How would you describe the institutional domain and how it has contributed to your leader development?
5. How would you describe the operational domain and how it has contributed to your leader development?
6. How would you describe the self-development domain and how it has contributed to your leader development?
7. Please describe the knowledge you have gained that has contributed to your development as a leader.
8. Please describe the skills you have gained that have contributed to your development as a leader.
9. Please describe the abilities you have gained that have contributed to your development as a leader.
10. How has the Army contributed to your development as a leader?
11. How would you rate the Army's program for developing soldiers into leaders for when they transition out of the Army into civilian work force (i.e., poor, fair, good, excellent)? Can you explain this ranking?
12. Are there other contributors to your leader development experience that have not been discussed thus far in the interview?
13. Would you consider yourself a leader after having served in the U.S. Army?
14. Are there other contributors to your leader development experience that have not been discussed thus far in the interview?