Lawrence Technological University "Leaders in the Making": An Effective Leader is a Learning Leader

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Abstract

This research examines the phenomena of leaders as learning leaders. We examined survey data on leadership from Lawrence Tech students and alumni to characterize effective leadership using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results). We define learning leaders as leaders who use lifelong learning, dialogue, and collaborative communication to lead self and others through leveraging strengths, identifying opportunities and aspirations, and being results-driven. We present practical recommendations for how to be a learning leader.

Take-Home Messages

"An effective leader is a learning leader", "Learning leaders have an appreciative mindset and know how to SOAR", "Learning leaders use lifelong learning, dialogue and collaborative communication to lead self and others", "Learning leaders leverage strengths, identify opportunities and aspirations, and are results-driven"

Leadership and Learning Styles

Leadership is an ageless topic. Origins of the term "leader" goes back to 1250 and "leadership" to 1815 (dictionary.com). In our search of the terms "leader" and "leadership styles", we found over 35,000 books to choose from Amazon.com alone, and hundreds of thousands of articles to read with a quick Google search. Most of the literature we found centered on how to become a leader, how to develop leaders, best styles of leadership, or best ways to lead. We went through two major leadership text books (Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy, 2012; Humphrey, 2014) and learned that there are over 39 documented styles on leadership (summarized in Table 1). We did not find "Learning Leader" or "Learning Leadership" as a documented style of leadership.

Table 1. Leadership Styles Found in the Scholarly/Practitioner Literature

Achievement leadership	Empowerment leadership	Relational leadership
Altruistic leadership	Entrepreneurial leadership	Reflective leadership
Appreciative leadership	Evidence-based leadership	Resonant leadership
Authentic leadership	Face-to-face leadership	Self-leadership
Autocratic leadership	Global leadership	Self-protective leadership
Bureaucratic Leadership	Humane-oriented leadership	Servant leadership
Charismatic leadership	Humble leadership	Shared leadership
Community leadership	Laissez-faire leadership	Situational leadership
Consideration leadership	Mindful leadership	Social-Emotional Leadership
Crisis leadership	Participative leadership	Strategic leadership
Democratic leadership	Peer leadership	Task leadership
Directive leadership	Positive leadership	Transactional leadership
Distributed leadership	Pragmatic leadership	Transformational leadership

Learning Leader

We conducted another search of the literature and narrowed our search terms to "learning leader", "learning leaders", and "learning leadership". We found articles primarily concerned with learning about leadership or learning about how to be a leader. For example, Kouzes and Posner (1995) said effective leaders learn through "challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart" (p. 323). The 2001 paper "Exploring the Relationships between Learning and Leadership" (Brown and Posner, 2001) suggests effective leaders learn from visioning, communicating, trusting others, and positive self-regard, and that effective leaders are labeled as "high action learners" engaged in "leadership behaviors like challenging, inspiring, enabling, modeling, and encouraging" (p. 278). As shown in Table 2, both AI and SOAR share key concepts in dialogue, reflection, relationships, and systems thinking that align with transformational learning theory. While AI helps leaders inspire others by helping them see the positives (what's best) in themselves and their contributions (Schiller, Holland, and Riley, 2001), SOAR provides a framework for leaders to nurture a collaborative dialogue between leader and follower through shared understanding and a commitment to action via strengths-based and opportunity-focused inquiry with a focus on aspirations and desired results (Stavros and Cole, 2013).

Table 2. Key Concepts in Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR

Appreciative Inquiry/SOAR	Transformational Learning Theory
Experience: high point or peak	Experience: Critical incidents and trigger events
Best of past reflection	Critical reflection
Appreciative learning cultures	Affective learning
Dialogue	Dialogue
Relationships based on support and trust	Relationships based on support and trust
Learning from self and others	Learning from self and others
Individual and whole system development	Individual development
Whole systems thinking	Open systems thinking

Methods

We surveyed over 600 participants (student and alumni) using an original online survey asking respondents about their perceptions of effective leadership. The online survey was comprised of open-ended questions on "What defines an effective leader" and "What defines a learning leader". The survey also contained a series of 15 dichotomous slider questions to learn if characteristics of an effective leader align with lifelong learning, AI, and SOAR. Table 3 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample

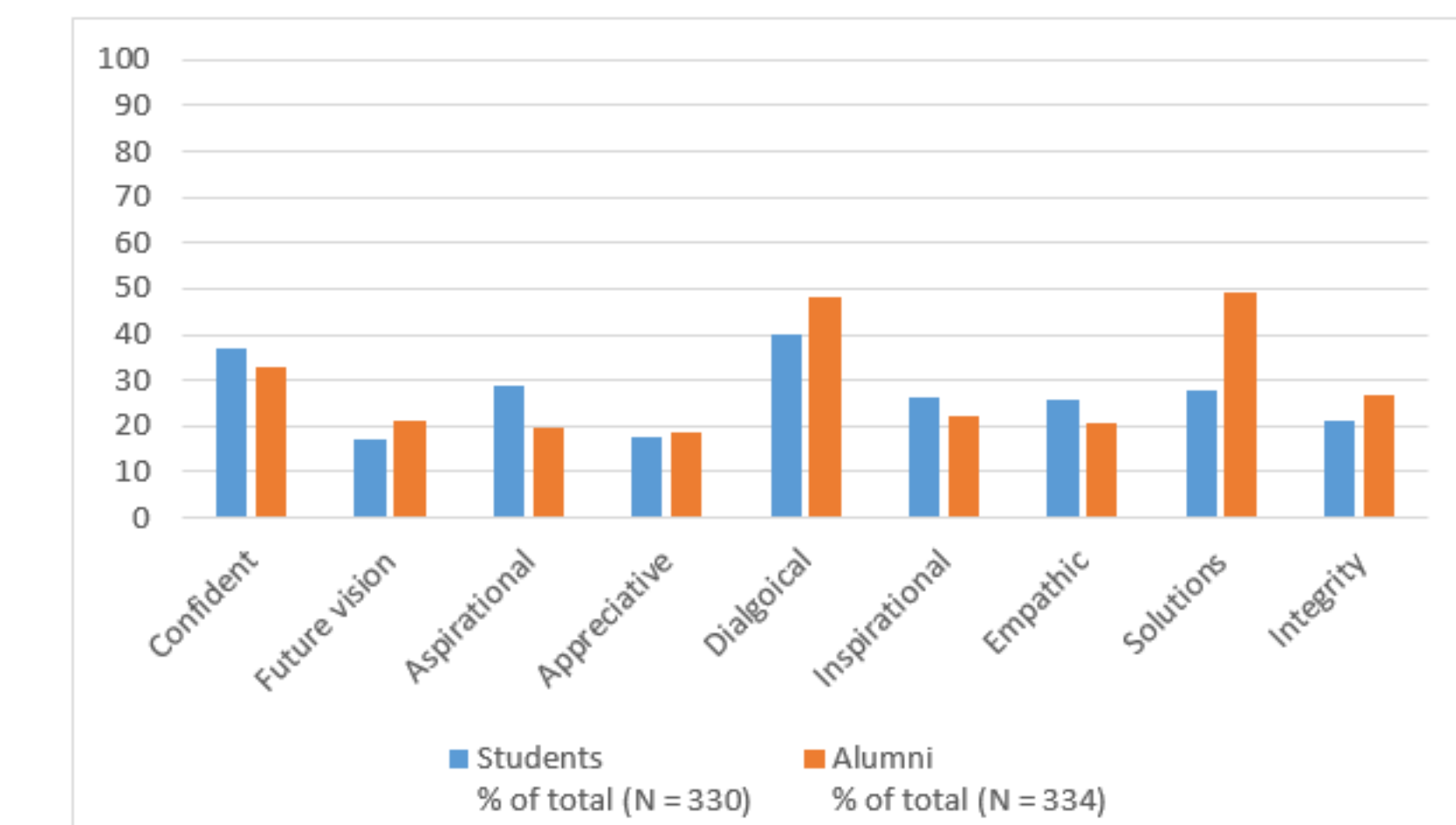|	Students (% of total, N = 330)	Alumni (% of total, N = 334)
Undergrad	77.3	66.5
Grad	22.7	33.5
Female	42.4	26.9
Male	50.6	70.4
14-18	11.5	0.0
19-22	50.6	0.9
23-32	23.6	27.8
33-64	9.4	55.1
65+	0.0	13.2

Results

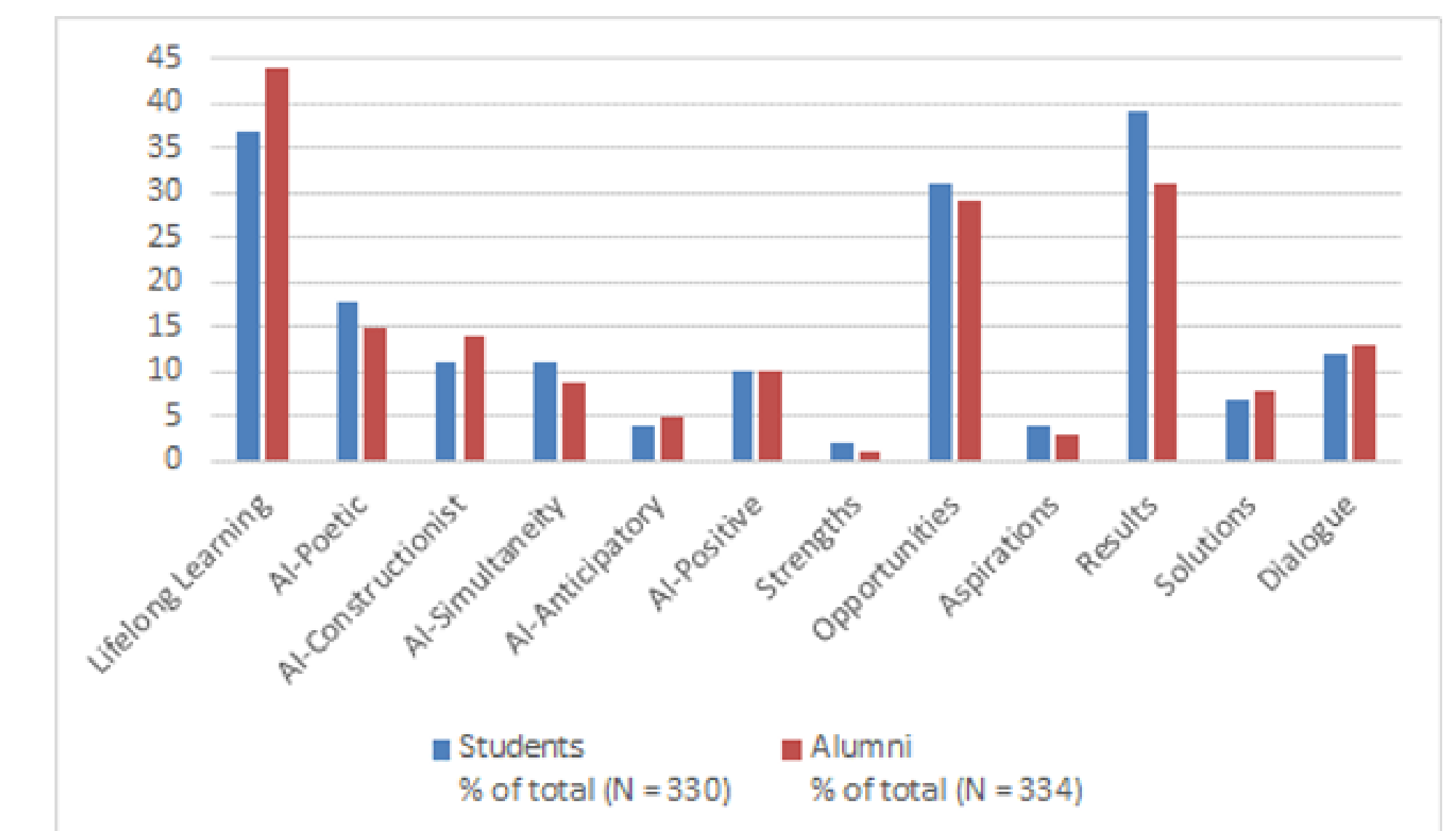Figure 1. Results of Open-Ended Question on What Defines an Effective Leader

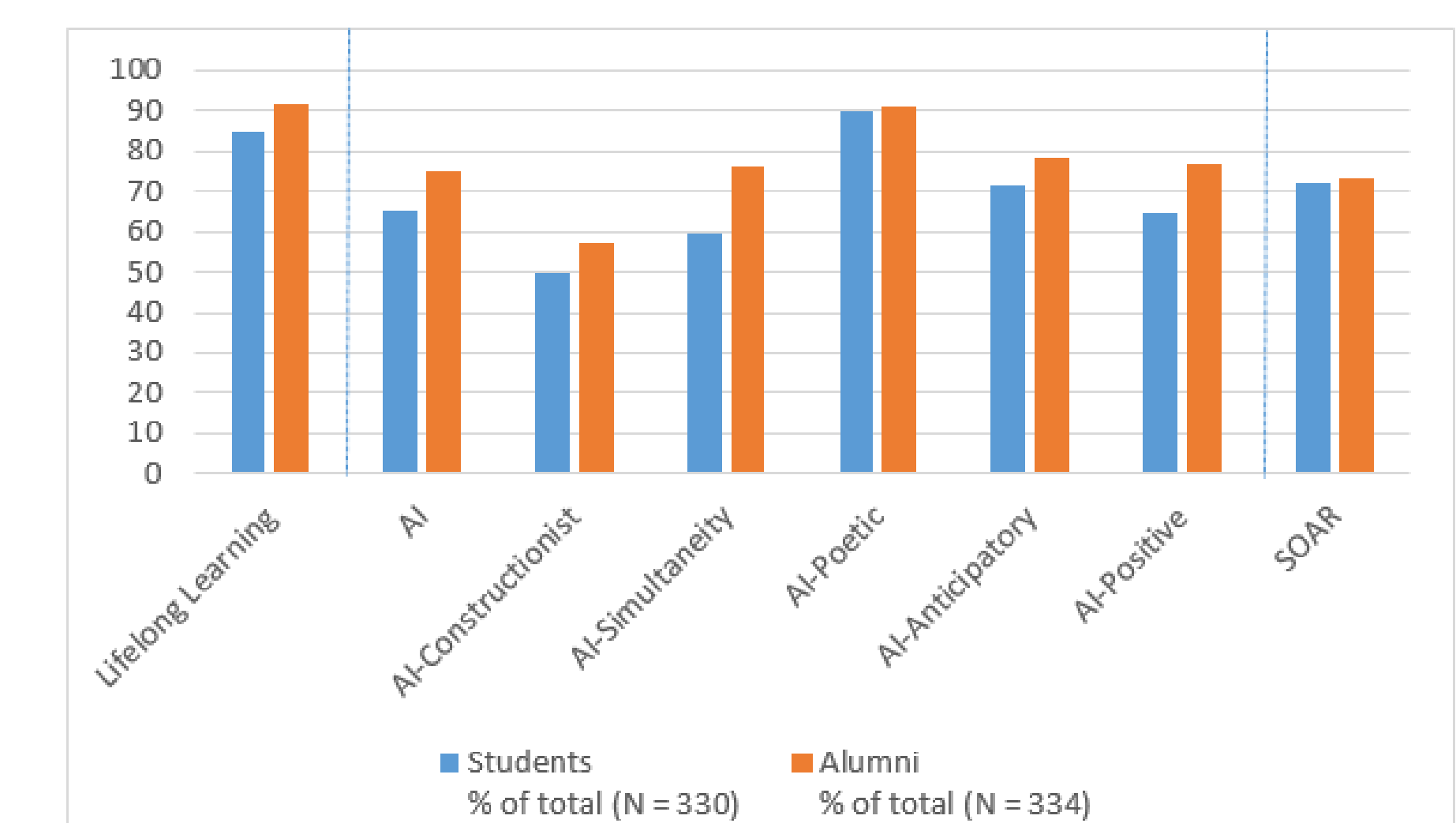Figure 2. Results of Open-Ended Question on What Defines a Learning Leader

Figure 3. Results of Slider Questions on Effective Leader Characteristics Aligned with Lifelong Learning, AI, and SOAR.

Recommendations

"telling others what they are doing right"

"encouraging followers to be leaders in their own right"

"communicating, listening, and asking for opinions and ideas"

"treating everyone with respect and appreciation"

"helping people grow"

"acting with understanding, empathy, respect and integrity"

"helping individuals overcome their weaknesses by improving their strengths"

"understanding what people's strengths are to put them in the best position possible"

"be a continual learner by researching leadership methods and learning about yourself as a leader"