

# An Analysis of Leadership Knowledge Acquisition Strategies of New Leaders

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## Abstract

This narrative literature analysis explores how new leaders in the United States acquire leadership knowledge. Based on a review of scholarly, practitioner, and grey literature, four primary learning strategies were identified: learning through experience, learning from instruction, self-learning, and learning from others. By synthesizing diverse sources using a modified thematic framework, the study helps explain how each theme contributes to leadership knowledge acquisition. The analysis emphasizes the commonality of experiential leadership activation, applying learning in a real-world context. This study adds conceptual clarity to a fragmented field, offering a practical framework for leadership development and highlighting gaps in empirical research. Findings may help new U.S. leaders acquire leadership knowledge, assist organizations in better supporting new leaders, and inform future research.

## Keywords

Leadership Development, New Leaders, Learning Strategies, Leadership Knowledge, Leadership Learning

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## 1. Background

### 1.1. Importance of Leadership Knowledge

#### 1.1.1. The Challenge of Learning to Lead

Leading people can be challenging. It involves understanding and applying flexibility, putting others first, being humble, keeping calm, and ultimately guiding others (Cole, 2017). Leading well requires acquiring leadership knowledge to build a solid foundation of leadership skills, as even the most well-intentioned leaders can struggle to lead effectively (Arruda, 2024). It is not enough for leaders to

simply recognize the importance of leadership knowledge. They must also understand how to acquire it (Knight, 2024), especially new leaders who face increased pressure to lead correctly in a changing world (Pisani, 2023).

### 1.1.2. Importance of Learning Leadership Strategies

Leadership development is essential, even starting as early as learning about leadership in school, where the curriculum prepares future leaders long before they enter the workforce (Coluccio et al., 2024). Leaders who understand how to lead can use effective leadership styles applicable to different situations (Agazu & Debela, 2024). Some styles can help with critical topics such as innovation (Carmeli & Paulus, 2014; Mai et al., 2022; Vera & Crossan, 2004) and continuous learning (Arruda, 2023; García-Morales et al., 2012), with well-trained leaders able to improve teamwork (Aguilera, 2006).

Leaders prioritizing leadership learning also have a better chance of improving internal culture thanks to knowing how to focus on tools like communication and emotional intelligence (Alwazzan, 2024). Continuous leadership learning enhances organizational outcomes by fostering responsiveness, especially if that learning is focused on adapting (Chughtai et al., 2023; Jansen et al., 2009), which helps pave the way for handling common and rapid organizational changes (Lukito & Perdhana, 2023). Companies where leaders prioritize leadership learning can achieve a competitive advantage (Nonaka & Toyama, 2005; Tan, 2023; Wu & Chen, 2012) because leaders skilled in leadership can make more effective decisions (Perkins, 2024) based on being able to make better judgements (Tassone, 2024).

### 1.1.3. Connections to Employee Engagement and Performance

One of the most critical aspects of leadership is enabling good employee engagement, which can help achieve good employee performance (Stein et al., 2021). About 70% of employee engagement within a team has been attributed to leadership (Arruda, 2024). Proper leadership directly boosts employee engagement thanks to increased organizational learning (Wallo et al., 2021) and contributes to greater job satisfaction, especially with targeted engagement development efforts (Swe & Lee, 2019). Companies with engaged employees see performance improvements from empowerment (Srivastava et al., 2006) and have noted impacts such as a 21% rise in profitability (Dyer, 2024), a 41% reduction in absenteeism, and a 90% retention in engaged workers compared to only 50% retention in disengaged ones (Dey, 2025).

Leaders who lead employees well help both attract and retain them (Jorgensen, 2022). When a leader correctly leads, they allow employees to see a connection between their values and those of their organization, ensuring that they become engaged and contribute effectively to team goals (Oosthuizen, 2012). Proper leadership can even help motivate employees to put in extra effort beyond explicit job responsibilities, further boosting productivity and performance (Devi & Narayana, 2016; Vejchaleermjit, 2012).

## 1.2. Impacts of a Lack of Leadership Knowledge

### 1.2.1. Common Engagement Mistakes

A lack of leadership knowledge decreases team engagement and employee performance (Mauren, 2024). Leaders who do not know how to lead well often make common mistakes that cause team disengagement. These include poor communication, where leaders often fail to provide regular and meaningful feedback (Economy, 2023). Regardless of contribution size, they may also not recognize employees (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Such leaders may fail to focus on an employee's growth and aspirations and may not support or understand team members personally and professionally (Finkel, 2024). Similarly, leaders may fail to empower employees, causing accountability issues and productivity drops, especially in dynamic work environments (Islam et al., 2018). When leadership skills are not acquired, leaders also do not understand emotional intelligence, without which leaders struggle to connect with employees meaningfully, limiting their ability to foster engagement and drive performance (Goleman, 2000).

### 1.2.2. Damaged Relationships and Trust

Leaders who lack leadership strategies may experience difficulties forming connections with employees, and employees may not trust (Cuddy et al., 2013) or respect the leader, which further drops performance and engagement (Porath, 2016). Due to a lack of understanding of leadership strategies, incorrect leadership approaches can erode and strain workplace dynamics, ultimately reducing openness to change and lowering the desire to collaborate (Zainab et al., 2022). Disengaged employees disconnect emotionally and mentally, causing job satisfaction to drop and performance to suffer, often feeling unheard, undervalued, and unsupported by a leader with whom they think they do not have a relationship (Swe & Lee, 2019).

### 1.2.3. Impacted Business Goals

Leadership learning is critical for organizational performance (Pachod et al., 2025). When leaders do not acquire leadership skills, decision-making issues can decrease employee engagement, risking operational continuity (Schleper et al., 2021) and disrupting business outcomes (Arruda, 2024). Disengaged employees are less creative, impacting their performance and ability to help the organization reach its objectives (Liu et al., 2012). Employees who are not led correctly lose vigor, dedication, and necessary absorption in their work, which are crucial for reaching business goals (Devi & Narayanamma, 2016). Leaders who lack leadership skills find it challenging to help employees feel more committed to organizational missions, which drops employee performance and hurts organizational results (Serrano & Reichard, 2011).

Drops in employee engagement have also occurred when leaders did not know how to lead during periods of change, causing employees to resist change and become frustrated by it (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), making it more difficult for the company to be agile to reach its goals (Jankelová & Joniaková, 2021). Such instances

ultimately cause employees to shift from an asset to an organizational liability (Chakraborty et al., 2024). A lack of employee engagement has already caused \$8.9 trillion in global organizational costs (Gallup, 2024), of which \$1.9 trillion was attributed to the price in the U.S. economy (Smith, 2024). In 2024, the U.S. employee engagement rate fell to the lowest level in a decade (Mauren, 2024).

#### **1.2.4. Stagnation of Organizational Learning**

Knowledge sharing is also adversely affected when leaders do not know how to gain leadership strategies. Such leaders can perpetuate a lack of information sharing, impacting organizational sustainability (Kim & Park, 2017) and decreasing overall organizational learning (Fotsch & Case, 2017). Leaders unaware of how to use leadership styles that help with knowledge management, such as transformational leadership, may experience difficulties spreading knowledge throughout the organization (Zainab et al., 2022), causing further drops in organizational performance and job satisfaction (Bisschoff et al., 2024; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2014).

#### **1.2.5. Abuse, Toxicity, and Attrition**

When not trained in leadership, some leaders risk using abusive supervision (Wu & Hu, 2009) or engaging in incivility (Zainab et al., 2022), often being unable to fix the situation (Martinko et al., 2011). This can be compounded by inconsistent leadership behavior, resulting in a high-stress environment for employees (Xu & Hansen, 2024). Untrained leaders may also fail to manage their own stress, negatively impacting decision-making and diminishing team outcomes (Harms et al., 2017). During such situations, toxic work environments may form, lowering organizational effectiveness (Einarsen et al., 2007; Tepper et al., 2017) due to correlated employee depression, anxiety, desires to quit, poor job performance (Pyc et al., 2016), poor well-being (Lin et al., 2013), and a feeling of being overwhelmed (Bersin, 2014). Eventually, when leaders treat employees with enough disrespect or disregard, they worsen workplace dynamics, especially if those were already strained (Porath & Pearson, 2013), causing severe team demotivation (Shuck & Herd, 2012) and eventual attrition that further compromises organizational performance (Adams, 2025; Miller-Jones, 2020).

### **1.3. Gap in Practice**

#### **1.3.1. Difficulties Learning to Lead within Organizations**

Organizations that fail to help their leaders with learning may experience employee disengagement and dissatisfaction (Crawford-Marks, 2024). On a global level, organizations vary in the leadership education they provide to their leaders. Annually, organizations invest \$60 billion in leadership development programs. At the same time, some companies have decreased their development budgets by 70% between 2023 and 2024 (Gialleli, 2025), while more than 60% of U.S. organizations report spending less than \$500 per leader annually on leadership development (Bersin, 2023). Only a minority of organizations believe their leadership

training is highly effective, causing a lack of confidence in organizational training (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Some leaders receive as little as an average of nine hours of leadership training over 10 years (McClung, 2023), with 60% of new leaders not receiving any training and failing within the first 24 months (Wharton Executive Education, 2024). A lack of proper training for new leaders has contributed to poor leadership, which has accounted for \$7 trillion globally and between \$960 billion and \$1.2 trillion per year in the United States (Wharton Executive Education, 2024).

Many leaders find company training unsatisfactory in preparing them for leadership roles (Gialleli, 2025), while organizations find it challenging to focus on the correct priorities that would result in effective leadership development (van der Westhuizen & Hewitt, 2021). There are instances where leaders do not have the proper training to lead during crises, causing adaptability, communication, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking to be underdeveloped (Dirani et al., 2020). Some leaders receive inferior leadership training because some programs fail to deliver proper results due to a focus on generic topics, a lack of appropriate measures, and a lack of organizational context (Gurdjian et al., 2014). Sometimes leaders cannot effectively apply learnings (Vogel et al., 2020), especially when training lacks alignment with real-world application (Geerts, 2024), perpetuated by leaders getting initial training but not ongoing training refreshers and support (Kruse, 2023).

### **1.3.2. Difficulties Learning to Lead as Contemporary Leaders**

What motivates and engages employees has changed over the years (Bartrop-Sackey et al., 2022; Johnston, 2023), causing employees to seek different things from leaders (Kelly, 2021). Leaders have difficulty understanding how to learn to build trust with employees (Račaitė-Samušienė et al., 2021), with many employees likewise frustrated with the relationship they have with their leaders (LaMotte, 2023). Younger employees, such as those from Generation Z, prefer leaders with strong emotional intelligence and strong communication, which many leaders lack an understanding of how to acquire (Yavuz & Ulucan, 2024). Some leaders have had difficulties accepting that the workplace has changed, and that they need to focus on learning different soft-skills strategies like improving employee well-being, which, when not improved, causes increased stress on the team (Dennison, 2022). Other times, leaders are unsure of how to properly learn to invest in their contemporary workforce (River, 2022).

### **1.3.3. Difficulties Learning to Lead as Digital Leaders**

While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the shift to remote work, it has become a lasting aspect of the modern workplace. The pandemic demonstrated the criticality of remote leadership (Ashkenas, 2025). Leading in a hybrid or remote environment is challenging for today's leaders, where 57% said they did not receive sufficient education when leading remote or hybrid teams (McLain & Pendell, 2023). As remote work becomes a permanent fixture, many leaders face

challenges leading effectively from a distance. Leadership demands new competencies to sustain virtual teams (Gutu & Medeleanu, 2023), and a leader's poor adaptation to remote leadership can hinder retention and employee engagement during times of uncertainty (Rotoli, 2022). Especially since the onset of COVID-19, leaders have had difficulty leading remotely due to not acquiring digital communication skills, since effective leadership must prioritize communication over physical location. Limited digital readiness among leaders negatively impacts employee satisfaction and organizational performance (Turmel, 2022).

#### 1.3.4. Difficulties Learning to Lead as New Leaders

New leaders, defined as those newly and recently appointed to people leadership positions, face unique challenges in leading effectively. They often have high standards for themselves, which can cause stress and insufficient ways to alleviate it (Lysfjord et al., 2024). New leaders sometimes lack core leadership skills, especially decision-making, a participative approach, transparent communication, and relationship-building (Wilson, 2020). From the start of the new leader's career, some organizations fail to onboard leaders correctly and focus on onboarding as simply a checklist item causing it to be too basic (Byford et al., 2017), and even if the new leaders complete onboarding plans, which can be detailed, it can take six months for them to become productive, with onboarding during crises further elongating timelines (Wiggins, 2020). First-time leaders often encounter significant challenges due to not understanding the personality shift needed from being an individual contributor to a leader of others (Gurchiek, 2023). Once new leaders are given leadership roles, they have trouble understanding the different organizational subcultures they enter (Quint & Xiang, 2013), not knowing how to build and use networks (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007; Williams & Heileman, 2024).

New leaders sometimes face difficulties defining their identity, building confidence, handling conflicts, or navigating uncertainty (Skarstein et al., 2024). They struggle to focus on quickly building skills for flexibility and adaptability and have trouble remaining effective (Herman, 2000). They are often unprepared for the job, and lack support from other leaders, yet still face pressure to act quickly. These challenges can hinder decision-making (Butler, 2024) and tend to lower employee engagement and organizational performance due to difficulties in knowing how to provide clear expectations to the team, not using feedback well, and struggling with modeling proper leadership behaviors (Partners in Leadership, 2019).

## 2. Study Elements

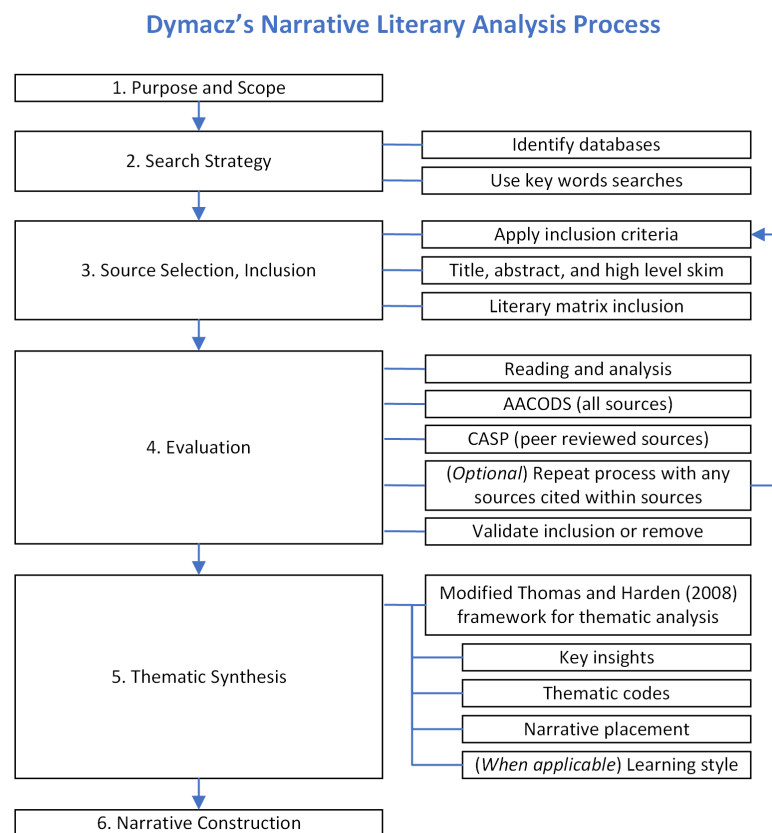
The purpose of this narrative literary analysis is to explore how new leaders in the United States acquire leadership knowledge. By examining scholarly, practitioner, and grey literature, the study identifies common themes, strategies, and contextual factors that shape leadership learning, aiming to clarify how emerging leaders build the skills needed for effective leadership. The generic business problem is the difficulty of acquiring leadership knowledge. The specific business problem is that without effective leadership knowledge acquisition strategies, new U.S. lead-

ers are unable to increase employee engagement and performance.

The gap in the literature is that the existing literature on leadership knowledge acquisition is dispersed and lacks synthesis, making it difficult for new leaders to understand actionable strategies for leadership knowledge acquisition. The related gap in practice is that new U.S. leaders lack effective ways to acquire people leadership knowledge, contributing to low employee engagement and performance. The project question is, how can new leaders in the United States acquire leadership knowledge to improve their teams' employee engagement and performance?

### 3. Method and Design

A narrative literary analysis was used as the method of exploration. This method allowed for flexible integration of diverse literature types, such as scholarly, practitioner, and grey sources. The researcher identified recurring themes, patterns, and strategies through this multi-source inclusion. The narrative analysis did not use a strict protocol-based inclusion and instead prioritized conceptual synthesis and relevance to the research question.



**Figure 1.** Dymacz's narrative literary analysis process.

In terms of structure, this narrative thematic literature analysis followed a structured six-step process to ensure both conceptual depth and methodological transparency, drawing from established guidance on narrative synthesis (Baumeister &

Leary, 1997; Ferrari, 2015) and thematic review practices (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005). Baumeister and Leary (1997) provided the foundational approach for conducting a concept-driven narrative review, emphasizing purposive source selection and thematic organization to build theoretical insight. Ferrari (2015) contributed to the structure for planning, searching, and documenting the narrative review process while maintaining flexibility and clarity in scope. Whitemore and Knafl (2005) provided the process for evaluating diverse sources using systematic inclusion criteria. The literary analysis process is shown in **Figure 1**.

### 3.1. Search Strategy, Selection, and Inclusion

This narrative review draws from credible literature to ensure a well-rounded synthesis. First, it includes scholarly, peer-reviewed articles from journals in leadership, business, education, organizational psychology, and related fields. Second, it provides practitioner literature from reputable sources such as Harvard Business Review, Forbes, and Inc. Third, some grey literature is included, such as credible blog posts and perspectives from reputable organizations. This diverse mix of literature types enabled a rich and flexible exploration of how leadership knowledge is acquired in practice.

The initial databases accessed were ProQuest, MDPI, Science Direct, Emerald, and Sagepub, with eventual expansion to additional databases, especially when reviewing sources cited within sources. A total of 82 journals were used for peer-reviewed sources. Practitioner publications were accessed from Forbes, Harvard Business Review, Inc., McKinsey, and SHRM, eventually expanding to 19 practitioner journals and 10 grey literature publishers.

Search terms were initially formed to seek out sources fitting the purpose. These included the following initial search strings:

- “Leadership knowledge acquisition”
- “How new leaders learn to lead”
- “Leadership development in the U.S.”
- “Early-career leadership training”
- “Emerging leader training”
- “Self-directed leadership learning”
- “Employee engagement and leadership learning”

Boolean operators, such as AND/OR, were used to refine results. The search focused on literature published between 2000 and 2025, with a stronger focus on literature published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure relevance to modern organizational environments.

Based on the literature used for the study, the search terms were most often found to return relevant information that could be applied to explaining new leaders, who were loosely defined, based on repetition of an explanation and definition of a new leader, as those appointed to people leadership positions for the first time and recently. Articles and sources were selected based on their relevance to the

project question. Inclusion criteria were:

- Focus on leadership development, learning, or knowledge acquisition topics
- Applicability to U.S. organizational contexts or broadly generalizable across industries
- Published in English
- From a credible scholarly, practitioner outlet, or grey literature outlet
- Accessible full-text format

Based on the literature, leadership roles filled by new leaders were predominantly found in the lower levels of hierarchies, such as first-line managers, and less commonly found in senior roles. Industries were most often reported as mixed in 65% of sources. Where explicitly stated for a portion of the sources, the industries included 16% of the educational sector, with the remainder spread across healthcare, financial services, human resources, manufacturing, supply chain, engineering, retail, and tourism. Tracking of these statistics in a literature matrix helped control sectoral bias.

### 3.2. Source Evaluation

All sources were evaluated using a modified version of the AACODS checklist (Tyndall, 2010), which was adapted to support appraisal across scholarly, practitioner, and grey literature. The evaluation looked at six dimensions: the authority of the author, the evidence supporting the claims, the scope and relevance, the objectivity, the date of publication, and the credibility of the source platform. For scholarly studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) checklist was also applied to assess methodological rigor, including the appropriateness of research design, research purpose, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and transparency. Each source was evaluated as high, medium, or low. This dual-framework approach assisted with a more rigorous evaluation process than typically found in a narrative thematic review with diverse sources.

### 3.3. Thematic Synthesis and Narrative Construction

Thematic analysis followed a modified version of the Thomas and Harden (2008) framework for thematic synthesis, consisting of three sequential steps and one optional step, designed to support data-driven coding and conceptually aligned narrative organization. First, key insights were extracted and described from each source's findings, discussion, or main arguments. These insights reflected significant points related to leadership knowledge acquisition, including specific learning practices, challenges, strategies, or contextual influences. Second, descriptive thematic codes were developed by identifying recurring patterns, phrases, or ideas across sources. These codes represented mid-level categories that grouped similar concepts while remaining grounded in the original data. Third, each code was connected to a higher-level narrative placement that positioned it within the structure of the narrative review. These thematic phrases reflected planned narra-

tive categories, such as whether the content addressed the problem, gap, or type of learning approach. The fourth and optional step was a column housing a learning style, if the source dealt with specific learning styles, to allow easier filtering and review of sources about a particular strategy of leadership knowledge acquisition. This approach ensured that thematic synthesis was grounded in the literature and strategically organized to align with the purpose of the review.

**Table 1** shows the literary analysis structure used to capture and analyze all sources before narrative inclusion.

**Table 1.** Literary matrix structure.

Column Name	Framework Inspiration	Data Type	Column Description
Index Number	Generic literary analysis	Numeric	Unique identifier for each source
APA Citation	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Full APA citation of source
Author	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Author portion of APA citation
Year	Generic literary analysis	Numeric (YYYY)	Year of source publication
Age	Generic literary analysis	“Past” or “present”	“Past” if <5 years old, “present” if >5 years old
Journal	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Name of journal
Link	Generic literary analysis	URL	Link to source
Database	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Source database name
Type of Source and Method	Generic literary analysis	Choice: qualitative, quantitative, conceptual/theoretical, mixed, case study, literary analysis, practitioner, grey literature	Type of source
Purpose of Article	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The primary focus and topic of the source
Population Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The population that the source is describing or exploring
Industry Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The industry the source is focusing on
Country Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The country on which the source’s analysis is centered
Journal Quality	Generic literary analysis	Choice: Medium, High, Low	Overall quality of the journal
Key Insights	Modified Thomas and Harden	Alphanumeric	The main takeaways of the source
Thematic Codes	Modified Thomas and Harden	Alphanumeric	Keywords that define the source
Narrative Placement	Modified Thomas and Harden	Alphanumeric	The location of the planned section of the literary analysis that the source will most likely contribute to
Method of Learning	Modified Thomas and Harden	Alphanumeric	The primary type of learning being described, if any
Author Credibility	AACODS	Choice: medium, high, low	The authority of the author, including their qualifications, affiliations, and reputation in the subject area
Evidence/References	AACODS	Choice: medium, high, low	Whether the source includes supporting evidence, citations, or references to back up claims

**Continued**

Topic Coverage Depth	AACODS	Choice: medium, high, low	How thoroughly the topic is explored, including the scope, detail, and nuance of its discussion
Objectivity of Content	AACODS	Choice: medium, high, low	Check for balance, bias, and neutrality in the topic presentation, especially regarding tone and intent
Significance to PQ	AACODS	Choice: medium, high, low	Relevance and usefulness of directly addressing the project question
Ethics Evaluation	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Whether there was ethical approval and participant rights protection, such as informed consent and confidentiality
Rigor Method	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Whether the chosen research methodology appropriately fits the study's aims and is thoroughly justified
Rigor Design	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Whether the study design is suitable and well-executed for addressing the research questions
Rigor Recruitment	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	If the participant recruitment strategy was clearly explained, appropriate, and ensured relevant representation
Rigor Data Collection	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Assesses the methods used to gather data (e.g., interviews, observations) and whether they were systematically applied and suitable
Rigor Data Analysis	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Whether the analysis process was clearly described, systematically conducted, and grounded in the data
Findings Presentation	CASP	Choice: medium, high, low, not applicable	Whether the results are presented, logically derived from the data, and supported by evidence

**Table 2** shows the types of literature analyzed, their quantities, and the overall percentage of that source type compared to the overall source pool. A total of 181 sources were reviewed.

**Table 2.** Literature source types.

Source Type	Source Quantity	Percentage
Practitioner	69	38.12%
Quantitative	41	22.65%
Literary analysis	35	19.34%
Qualitative	16	8.84%
Grey Literature	10	5.52%
Conceptual/theoretical	4	2.21%
Mixed	4	2.21%
Case study	2	1.10%
Grand total	181	100.00%

#### 4. Thematic Findings

Despite decades of research on leadership development, there has not been a con-

sensus on how new leaders should properly acquire leadership knowledge (Day et al., 2014). However, both scholars and business practitioners have identified strategic leadership knowledge and acquisition best practices that can be organized into specific themes: learning through experience, learning from instructions, self-learning, and learning from others.

A mind-map of the integrated content is depicted in Figure 2.

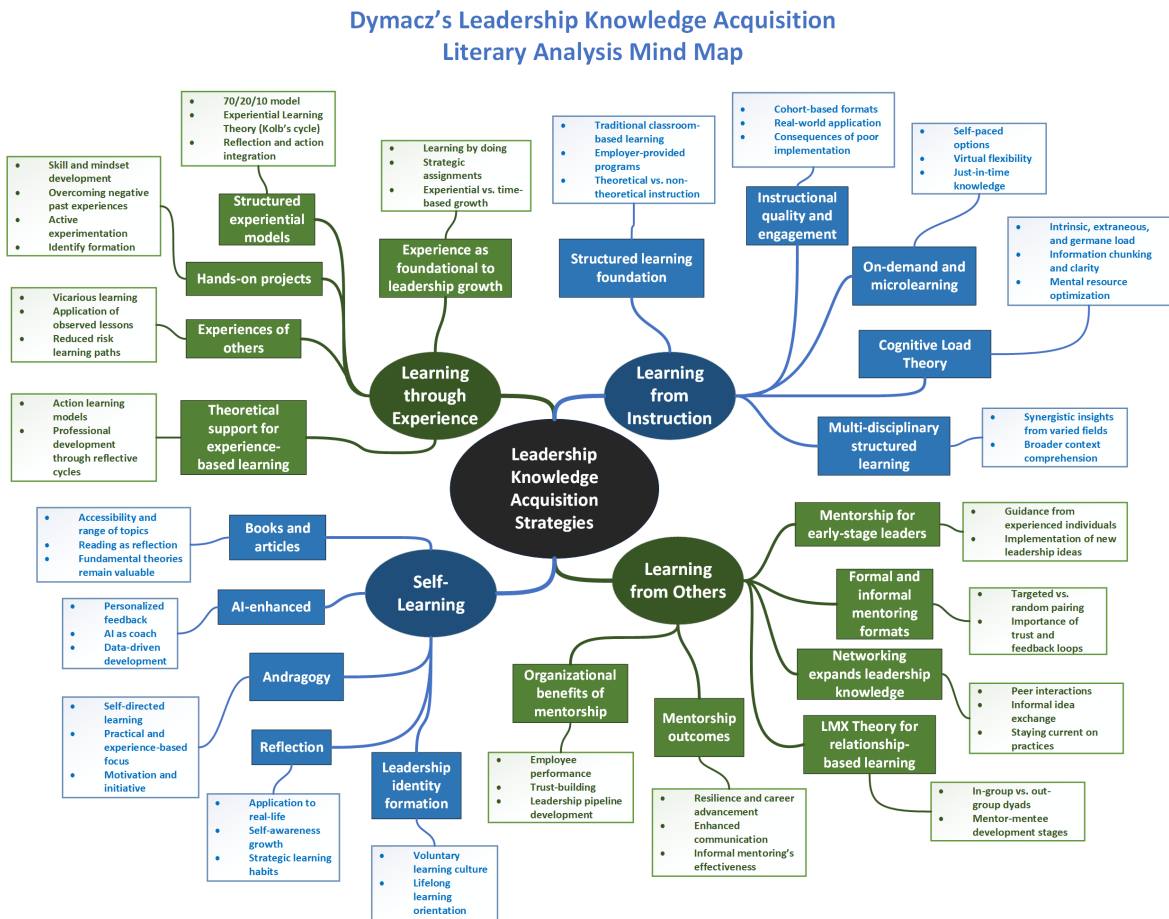


Figure 2. Dymacz's leadership knowledge acquisition literary analysis mind map.

#### 4.1. Learning through Experience

Some leaders believe that experience is the best teacher and must be at the forefront of leadership learning (Day & Dragoni, 2015). However, to learn through experience faster than waiting for time to elapse, strategic projects (Buckner, 2019; Forbes Human Resources Council, 2019) and challenging assignments (McCall, 2010) have been found to provide new leaders with rapid ways to gain that experience. Hands-on learning through situations allows leaders to build knowledge from application (Dragoni et al., 2009), especially if situations are difficult (Dodd, 2004). The challenge of learning from experience involves ensuring that lessons can be understood and applied (Center for Creative Leadership, 2022). Experience can also be primary, where the leader learns from it, or secondary, where the

leader learns from the lessons of others, which allows leaders to gain knowledge, abilities, and skills based on what others have already gone through (Kulesza, 2023).

There have been attempts to put a structure around experience. For example, the 70/20/10 model has attempted to justify that 70% of knowledge is on-the-job learning, with only 20% related to interactions with others, and a mere 10% comprising structural learning (Gambil, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, experiential learning theory, developed by David Kolb, provides insights into the benefits of structured instruction, integrating reflection and practical application (Ajani, 2023). It postulates that learning is a cyclical process with four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Learners engage in direct experience, reflect on it, develop theoretical insights from reflections, and then apply their knowledge in practice (Ajani, 2023). Leaders develop their capacity, identity, and mindset best through active, hands-on experiences that are paired with instruction (Ajani, 2023; Recigno & Kramer, 2022), generating benefits of skill building, knowledge acquisition, and self-reflection that help achieve higher levels of performance (Monroe et al., 2025). This form of action-oriented learning, where active participation in the education is essential for understanding how to apply it, helps leaders solidify knowledge (Ndlovu et al., 2025) and, if possible, the experiential learning can even help undo past negative learning from poor experiences (Ho et al., 2025).

## 4.2. Learning from Instruction

Traditional leadership training has always been essential for teaching leaders to retain high-performing employees (MacLachlan, 2024), providing leaders with skills that help them lead in a rapidly changing world (Hoagland, 2025), and as a way to help leaders climb the corporate ladder (Hoagland, 2025), especially for new Generation Z leaders who often seek out and prioritize leadership development (Wells, 2023). Researchers have found that structured dealership programs based firmly on leadership development theories were the key to overcoming leadership challenges, as some contemporary programs lacked theoretical backing, especially when it came to improving ethics and productivity (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). For employer-offered leadership training to be practical, leaders often seek training with a cohort format that incorporates real-world experience (Expert Panel, 2024), otherwise risking ineffective results (Yemiscigil et al., 2023).

Besides employer-offered and traditional training, structured learning was also found to help leaders in the form of on-demand courses, based on these being seen as quick, easy, and effective ways for leaders to boost their leadership knowledge (Hall, 2021). Some leaders prefer these on-demand courses given their flexibility, the ability to move quickly through the material, and virtual options (American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 2022). With on-demand learning, leaders can do self-paced education for an affordable price on their own time, with

many lessons applicable to different levels of leadership, ranging from beginners to experts (American Management Association, n.d.), as well as covering diverse topics (Chiu et al., 2024).

Cognitive load theory, developed by John Sweller, explains how structured learning helps people absorb information efficiently by managing three types of mental effort: intrinsic, extraneous, and germane. The inherent load comes from the complexity of the material, the extraneous load is an unnecessary strain from poor instruction, and the germane load is the worthwhile effort that helps build understanding (Gkintoni et al., 2025; Sandoval-Medina et al., 2024). Instructional material must be optimized for a positive effect (Gkintoni et al., 2025), helping leaders focus on key insights without being overwhelmed with unnecessary details (van Nooijen et al., 2024). This is primarily because when one activity consumes too many cognitive resources, fewer remain for other activities, causing excessive cognitive load to impair learning (Aliqkaj & Carvajal, 2024; Jian & Abu Bakar, 2024). Microlearning, an approach to reducing cognitive load by ensuring that leadership training materials are presented in small and manageable units, often enhances retention (Denojean-Mairet et al., 2024).

### 4.3. Self-Learning

In favor of self-learning, some leaders felt that books and articles were tremendously powerful leadership knowledge acquisition tools (Devry, 2023) since they are accessible, simple, and cover diverse subjects (Titus, 2024). Reading material helps the entire spectrum of leaders, from entrepreneurs to C-suite level, for both personal and professional growth in leadership topics, thanks to being easily accessible and helping offer practical suggestions that allow leaders to reflect on critical material (McGrath, 2024), such as how to build self-esteem (Field, 2024). Books are also valuable because they cover fundamental theories, which usually makes the material relevant despite time passing (Sommerfield & Park, 2025) and especially enjoyable for leaders who seek out stable fundamentals about the human behavior that drives leadership theory (Bloomberg, 2024). Leadership from books often requires a strategic, well-planned, and consistent approach to be effective (Sheridan et al., 2016), where often the utilization of a library and its expert staff can aid the leader (Prasetyo et al., 2024).

Contemporary self-driven learning often emphasizes using artificial intelligence (AI), thanks to its ability to help leaders with critical thinking and sense-making (Jeffries & Ahn, 2024). While this is still a growing field, despite leaders admitting to using generative AI for leadership skill enhancement (Gialleli, 2025), only about 24% of leaders used AI (Kruse, 2024), despite 80% of executives believing that AI is critical to the success of the organization (Bosworth, 2024). Luckily, some leaders felt that AI augmented their skills, helping them combine AI-driven data with the leader's human approach (Hougaard & Carter, 2024). Such leaders used AI to help them build the resilience necessary for unexpected situations (Wells, 2023), make more compassionate decisions (Carter et al., 2025), obtain

quick and helpful feedback about challenges (Donovan & Clark, 2024), enhance efficiency, receive guidance around growth opportunities, and reap the benefits of personalization (Bravo, 2024; Negura & Ionescu, 2024) where AI acted like a personal leadership coach by helping track progress and providing real-time suggestions (Bosworth, 2024).

Adult self-learning has been linked to the theory of andragogy, a term coined by Malcolm Knowles to describe the methods and four principles used in adult education (MurrellJones & Akin, 2024): adults are self-directed learners, they bring with them prior experience, they want to learn what is relevant to them, and they seek practical and real-world application (Halpern & Tucker, 2015). Despite it having been developed for face-to-face instruction (Sánchez-Doménech & Cabeza-Rodriguez, 2024), andragogy stems from the adult dissatisfaction with formal, structured learning and is a primary reason why adults gravitate towards online learning (Halpern & Tucker, 2015) where they can experience less prescription and more self-direction (Chinnasamy, 2013). Self-reflection is a strong component of self-learning (Glancy & Isenberg, 2013) because adult learners want to know why they are learning something and how to use it in real-life scenarios (Sánchez-Doménech & Cabeza-Rodriguez, 2024). Self-directed adult learning works because it is voluntary instead of compulsory (Wang, 2012), where the motivation to learn helps leaders reach their full development potential (Yang, 2004) and helps them form a leadership identity (Recigno & Kramer, 2022).

#### 4.4. Learning from Others

Learning from others is critical for first-time learners (Partners in Leadership, 2019). Mentorship programs are essential for such leaders, often pairing new leaders with experienced ones (Forbes Human Resources Council, 2019). Thanks to a mentor, new leaders often understand how to implement new ideas (Gialleli, 2025) and gain experience and knowledge that otherwise would not be known to them or difficult to obtain (Ely et al., 2010). Effective mentoring is often targeted rather than random, has a feedback mechanism, and focuses on building trust between mentor and mentee (Lester et al., 2011). Through mentorship, leaders learn how to expand networks (Buckner, 2019; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) whether formal or peer-based (Wells, 2023), which helps new leaders stay current on the latest leadership methods and approaches used by others (Pachod et al., 2025) and helps build leadership skills through best practice sharing (Mink, 2024).

Mentoring focuses on communication, relationships, and interaction optimization (Bunin et al., 2020), thriving on flexibility devoid of rigid rules (Pock & Pangaro, 2023), where sometimes an informal mentorship relationship becomes beneficial (Holt et al., 2016). A mentor helps with growth, resilience, and psychosocial support (Doğan et al., 2025; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). The relationship between mentor and mentee provides long-term commitment, enhancing chances of future promotion (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994). Mentorship efforts are beneficial for organizations as they foster strong leader-follower relationships and en-

hance employee performance (Shih et al., 2024), improving leadership skills that can help raise employee trust and boost effectiveness (Song et al., 2024).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, developed by George Graen and Mary Uhl-Bien, covers the importance of mentoring relationships and the foundation of strong communication and optimized interactions (Danesh & Huber, 2022). It involves various dyads, or levels of relationships, such as high-quality dyads formed from trust and respect, known as the in-group, and low-quality dyads plagued by limited trust, known as the out-group (Danesh & Huber, 2022). Through mentorship, a relationship proceeds through four levels: the stranger group, where relationships slowly start; the acquaintance phase, where more valuable interactions take place; the mature partnership phase, during which trust blossoms; and the routinization phase, where ongoing and stable support exists (Danesh & Huber, 2022). In its simplest form, the dyadic relationship between a more experienced individual and a less experienced one helps the less experienced individual grow (Van Emmerik et al., 2005) and learn better thanks to being supported through challenges (Ugrin et al., 2008).

## 5. Discussion and Reflection

### 5.1. Past Research Disagreements

There have been disagreements about the effectiveness of specific leadership approaches. For example, not all leaders believed that structured training was essential (Bouchrika, 2024), and some simply did not want that form of training at all, with many leaders rejecting school-like structured programs (Kruse, 2024). Structured instruction was also cited as inflexible, often accused of centering on the teacher rather than the student (Gkintoni et al., 2025), and less effective than targeted mentorship programs (Lester et al., 2011).

In partial favor of instruction, structured leadership development was found effective only when leaders selected learning paths aligned with their goals (Buckner, 2019) or when learning was tailored to strategic planning, communication, and talent management (Madufo et al., 2024). It was also noted that an experiential component was required (de Agapito et al., 2024), where just structured instruction without hands-on application was insufficient (Day & Dragoni, 2015). Similarly, some researchers felt leaders developed leadership through hands-on learning, not lecture-based methods and instruction (Recigno & Kramer, 2022), with concerns that not all leaders prioritized experience and instead opted for structured learning (Kjellström et al., 2020).

Besides structured learning, there were concerns about mentorship as not all mentors were always sufficiently experienced to add value (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000), or there were missing frameworks to guide leaders on effective ways to learn from others correctly (Ely et al., 2010). Similarly, with self-learning, despite AI being mentioned, it was sometimes seen as only helpful to skilled leaders rather than those who struggled with leadership (Burkus, 2024), and some shared skepticism about its value or feared ethical risks (Jeffries & Ahn, 2024).

Not everyone agreed on best practices. Some experts believed it was difficult to determine effective leadership knowledge acquisition strategies since no one style was optimal, and what worked depended on the individual leader and their situation (Zamir, 2024). Finding the ideal leadership acquisition strategy during the early days of a leader’s career was especially challenging (Day et al., 2014).

### 5.2. Implications and Recommendations

Figure 3 depicts a framework consisting of the four main learning acquisition themes, recommendations for new leaders, a critical experiential leadership activation focus, recommended support that the organization should provide, and implications with a specific focus on employee engagement and performance.

Dymacz’s Leadership Knowledge Acquisition Framework for New Leaders

	New Leader Behaviors		Experiential Leadership Activation Focus		Organizational Support		General Organizational Implications	Engagement & Performance Implications
<b>Learning through Experience</b>	Pursue challenging assignments, actively seek stretch projects, reflect systematically on actions taken, and request feedback to identify strengths and improvement areas. Reflect by maintaining a leadership journal.	+	Hands-on assignments, stretch assignments, strategic projects, real-time problem-solving	+	Design stretch roles, job rotations, and real-time reflection tools to accelerate experiential learning.	=	Faster skill development, stronger decision-making, and increased leadership adaptability.	Boosts employee trust in leadership, fosters a proactive work culture, and drives performance through example-led learning.
<b>Learning from Instruction</b>	Participate in structured learning such as formal training, leadership boot camps, and certificate programs. Align course content with personal leadership goals and ensure to select training with real-world application. Use simulations and case studies to connect theory to workplace needs.	+	Real-world case studies, simulations, application-based cohort learning	+	Provide cohort-based and theory-grounded training integrated with workplace challenges.	=	Improved retention of leadership concepts and better alignment between learning and business needs.	Ensures leaders are prepared to support, motivate, and communicate with teams effectively, leading to higher engagement and accountability.
<b>Self-Learning</b>	Develop a personalized learning plan using books, podcasts, videos, and AI tools. Set specific goals for self-reflection. Use leadership self-assessments, maintain learning logs, and seek feedback from peers to reinforce progress.	+	Material connected to the leader’s real-life responsibilities, learnings tested on the job	+	Support self-learning through digital libraries, AI coaching, and self-paced learning platforms.	=	Cultivates independent, motivated leaders and reinforces a culture of continuous improvement.	Leaders model continuous learning and reflection, which encourages employee autonomy, confidence, and initiative.
<b>Learning from Others</b>	Proactively seek mentors inside and outside the organization. Join leadership communities and build peer support networks. Schedule regular touch base conversations, be open to feedback, and invest in relationship-building activities that foster two-way trust and growth.	+	Actively applying guidance in team dynamics, communication practices, and leadership behavior	+	Establish formal mentoring systems, promote informal peer learning, and provide networking opportunities.	=	Enhanced leadership confidence, stronger collaboration, and more resilient leadership pipelines.	Strengthens leader-employee trust and team cohesion, increasing employee morale, belonging, and retention.

Figure 3. Dymacz’s leadership knowledge acquisition framework for new leaders.

#### 5.2.1. Learning through Experience

New leaders can grow by taking on challenging assignments that push them beyond familiar territory. These experiences involve managing complexity, handling responsibility, and making decisions in real-world situations. New leaders can actively seek roles that involve discomfort, ambiguity, and stretch objectives, as these situations accelerate development. Organizations can support new leaders by creating structured experiential opportunities such as job rotations, high-stakes projects, and leadership-in-action scenarios that place leaders in realistic contexts. When this experiential learning is embedded in leadership development, organizations may observe faster skill acquisition, better decision-making, and increased employee trust. This approach also fosters a culture of accountability and owner-

ship, positively influencing team engagement and performance.

### **5.2.2. Learning from Instruction**

Instructional learning may help new leaders acquire structured knowledge thanks to practical frameworks. Leaders can benefit from participating in formal training programs, cohort-based development experiences, and multidisciplinary coursework. These may prepare them to handle strategic and people-oriented challenges. Organizations can support this type of learning by providing theory-based instruction with clear learning outcomes, ensuring content alignment with real-world leadership tasks. This training may help new leaders build a solid conceptual foundation and apply what they learn daily. Well-designed instructional programs correlate with improved retention of leadership practices and equip leaders with more effective ways to motivate and support teams. In turn, this may lead to stronger team performance and may enhance the overall employee experience.

### **5.2.3. Self-Learning**

Self-directed learning allows leaders to tailor their development journey to individual needs and interests. Tools such as books, articles, digital platforms, and AI-driven resources can help leaders on their own time, allowing them to develop personalized learning plans matching their growth priorities. Organizations can reinforce this behavior by offering access to digital libraries, learning platforms, and resources that facilitate flexible and independent learning. This support enables leaders to continually evolve, stay updated, and refine their leadership style, creating a culture of self-reflection, continuous improvement, and enhanced organizational motivation. Ultimately, these factors can increase team engagement, raise personal accountability, and promote a culture centered around development.

### **5.2.4. Learning from Others**

Social and relational learning, including mentorship and peer-based dialogue, are vital in how new leaders gain insight and confidence. Leaders can benefit from forming trusted relationships that offer emotional support, use constructive feedback, and engage in perspective-sharing. New leaders who actively seek out internal and external mentors and participate in open discussions with peers may broaden their understanding of leadership. Organizations can support this by building formal mentoring systems, promoting leadership conversations, and enabling peer learning environments across levels. These relationships may reinforce leadership behavior and help new leaders feel more connected and supported, especially in a hybrid and virtual world. The outcomes can be cohesive team environments, increased leader confidence, and improved employee engagement through strengthened trust and collaboration.

### **5.2.5. Experiential Leadership Activation**

Across all four methods of leadership knowledge acquisition, a unifying element of experiential leadership activation appears as a recurring theme. This concept

reflects the need for leadership learning grounded in real-world practice and is defined as the inclusion of experiential activities that help the leader with knowledge acquisition. Regardless of the learning method, strategies become useful when they are activated through application in dynamic leadership contexts. While each technique emphasizes a different approach, the leader must translate learning directly into leadership behavior, decision-making, and relationship management.

Experiential activation is the core of learning through experience. Leaders gain knowledge through active participation in strategic projects, complex decision-making, and navigating ambiguous situations. Stretch assignments and challenging scenarios foster leadership identity development, skill acquisition, and mindset formation. Experiential learning accelerates capability-building by immersing leaders in real-time problems that require reflection and promote learning during the situation. Such experiences are enhanced with reflection and feedback loops, allowing new leaders to make meaning from their actions and adapt based on outcomes.

Experiential leadership activation also remains essential for learning from instruction. While often theory-driven, structured programs may be more effective when they include simulations, case-based exercises, and applied cohort activities that tie directly to leadership responsibilities. Instructional learning becomes impactful when leaders connect content to actual work. Courses incorporating experiential components help bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially when learning outcomes are tied to leadership challenges. This experiential component helps new leaders absorb concepts and gain the confidence and ability to use them.

The same dynamic applies to both self-learning and learning from others. Books, articles, and AI tools offer personalized and flexible learning, but their value may be enhanced when leaders internalize the information and apply it to their current leadership responsibilities. Likewise, mentorship and peer guidance benefit a leader when insights are tested through live interactions. Experiential leadership activation occurs through reflection, behavior change, and adaptation to fit the scenario. Ultimately, knowledge acquisition may be more successful across all four learning strategies when leaders connect learning to lived experience, making experiential leadership activation a common element of effective leadership development.

### **5.3. Limitations**

This narrative literature analysis has several limitations that should be acknowledged. While the review included diverse peer-reviewed, practitioner, and grey literature sources, only a combination of publicly available articles and databases from the researcher's alumni association library was used. This may have excluded some peer-reviewed studies located behind paywalls or in less accessible academic databases. Additionally, although the review applied structured evaluation crite-

ria, such as AACODS and CASP, the subjective nature of any thematic synthesis and the researcher's interpretive role may introduce some bias into theme identification, against which source triangulation and an in-depth, traceable literary matrix were used.

While practitioner sources added real-world relevance, they sometimes lacked methodological rigor or transparency about data collection and analysis, which may impact their reliability. Additionally, literature on emerging methods of leadership knowledge acquisition, such as AI-based leadership learning, was limited in scope and depth, reflecting the novelty of the topic and a need for further scholarly investigation. AI studies often lacked methodological rigor (Feigerlova et al., 2025) or were based on ethical concerns around AI and the need for additional research (Malone, 2024).

Lastly, while this review focused on the U.S. leadership context, it drew from a general leadership knowledge acquisition perspective based on a lack of explicitly narrow secondary research about new U.S. leaders. There were limited scholarly studies on ways of acquiring knowledge other than an emphasis on theory-driven, structured learning. There were also fewer studies where leaders, especially new leaders, advised on what strategies worked for them. Non-scholarly sources often provided less research data and were more at risk of being opinionated. They also lacked transparency about data analysis. Such sources were also challenging to access if published before 2020.

## 6. Conclusion and Future Research

This narrative literature analysis highlights that new leaders in the United States face significant challenges in acquiring the leadership knowledge required to lead well and improve employee engagement and performance. Through a synthesis of scholarly, practitioner, and grey literature, four key methods of leadership knowledge acquisition emerged: learning through experience, learning from instruction, self-learning, and learning from others. Each theme offers new U.S. leaders a distinct path to build their leadership identity, adaptability, and decision-making capacity in real-world settings.

This study adds value to the body of knowledge by synthesizing and organizing diverse literature into a cohesive framework that clarifies how new leaders in the United States can acquire leadership knowledge. By mapping the commonalities across these approaches, and looking at both frequency and in-depth quality of the sources, the study creates new conceptual clarity around leadership knowledge acquisition. It extends the literature by offering a structured yet flexible model to support leadership growth better, especially through the lens of experiential leadership activation.

While these findings provide practical direction, they also reveal critical gaps for future research. There is a need for longitudinal and mixed-method studies that explore how new leaders personally experience and evaluate these learning methods. In addition, emerging tools like AI-driven platforms warrant deeper in-

vestigation, especially regarding their effectiveness, accessibility, and ethical implications. Further exploration into industry-specific, generational, and global variations could uncover how context shapes leadership learning. Understanding these dynamics may strengthen the evidence base and better support the next generation of leaders.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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