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Justified Approach to Business Research

Executive Summary

This paper presents a justified philosophical and methodological approach to conducting research in business leadership, emphasising pragmatic constructivism as the most suitable research paradigm. It argues that in today's dynamic and complex business environments, traditional positivist and empiricist approaches—based on objective, deterministic worldviews—are inadequate for understanding the fluid and multi-perspective nature of leadership challenges.

Instead, the authors advocate for a paradigm grounded in constructive realism, which recognises that reality is perceived through the subjective lenses of individuals and is shaped through dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making. This approach values multiple perspectives, scepticism, and the contextual, provisional nature of knowledge.

Two research methods are proposed to support this paradigm:

1. Participatory Action Research (PAR): A collaborative process where leadership teams co-identify issues and co-create resolution strategies through structured dialogue and clustering of related challenges.
2. Aspirational Action Research (AAR): A more autonomous process based on pre-agreed core values, preferred leadership behaviours, and organisational purpose, using iterative testing and reflection to refine strategy and action.

Both methods prioritise actionable outcomes over theoretical generalisations and embrace short-term planning cycles responsive to ongoing disruption.

The proposed research approach is underpinned by:

- Ontology: Reality is constructed through shared perspectives.
- Epistemology: Knowledge emerges from reflective, iterative action.
- Axiology: Leadership values drive all research and action.

The authors acknowledge limitations, including low generalisability and potential for confirmation bias, but justify these as acceptable trade-offs for achieving timely, short-term context-specific action.

Adopting a research approach (research paradigm, philosophy, and methodology)[1] has consequences for the reliability and validity of the competitive action selected. Therefore, leadership must acquire a basic appreciation of the proposed research approach. However, the meanings of research-related terminology and their conceptual implications will vary from one disciplinary or philosophical context to another. Further, the definition of terminology within any given disciplinary area or "community of thought" also progressively evolves. Accordingly, please note how the related terms are specified in the footnote below.

Over the past several centuries, two distinct classes of research paradigms have progressively evolved[2] and, up to about the mid-

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[1]. **Research paradigm** is a way of thinking about

- How reality is viewed. That is its **ontology** that is the nature of reality: for example, is there a real world which exists independently of any individual's perceptions of it that we can experience and learn about (realism), or can we only take as real and knowable what we individually experience (relativism)?
- How reality can be understood, its **epistemology**. That is how you can know/access what you seek to understand. For example, "How can I best identify what actions I need to take to secure my desired outcomes given my leadership approach and circumstances?"
- What prioritised core values are relevant, Its **axiology**. That is what values guide my acquisition and use of knowledge derived from my research? Axiology requires, for example, that your leadership team's shared prioritised core values drive the action selected to secure desired outcomes' ensuring the privacy of information provided by your respondents by the ways the data collected are stored and protected on behalf of respondents

Research Philosophy is the philosophical underpinning of a research paradigm and the research methodology given the research paradigm.
Research Methodology refers to the overarching strategy and rationale of your research approach. It involves determining what and how data will be collected and used in your research to answer your research questions together with the logic that underpins your chose of research methods -the procedures used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data for a study. They provide a systematic approach to addressing research questions, while ensuring that the research findings are reliable and valid.
Research methods are the techniques, tools, and procedures used to collect, analyse, and interpret data for a study. They provide a systematic approach to reliably and validly address research questions.

[2] Babich, B. E., From Fleck's 'Denkstil' to Kuhn's Paradigm: Conceptual Schemes and Incommensurability, *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, (2003). Daymon, C and Holloway, I (2002) *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications*. Routledge: London; Lincoln, Y., Lyneham, S.A., and Guba, E.G.. (2011). Paradigms and perspectives in

20th Century, research undertaken was deemed generalisable only if the research was conducted by an objective external observer (external to the research context). This research sought to test hypotheses deduced from actual or proposed theories. This research approach was labelled positivist and was assumed to yield value-free objective knowledge.

For centuries, in the natural sciences and all emerging disciplines seeking research community legitimacy, this positivist research approach was accepted as the basis for discovering 'objective' generalisable value-free truth. It supported Newtonian mechanistic, deterministic thinking characterised by linear cause-and-effect systemic stability and the view that every event, including human actions, is causally determined by prior events and the laws of nature. Determinism further suggests that the future is predetermined and that there is no genuine freedom of choice or spontaneity in events. That is, in the context of science, Determinism implies that cause-and-effect relationships can explain natural phenomena and that, given sufficient information, future outcomes can be predicted.

All strands of Empiricist thinking[3] emphasise that knowledge depends on experience and cannot rest solely on a priori reasoning, intuition or revelation. By the 19th and into the early 20th Century, empiricism accepted Determinism and argued that learning about the world required rigorous, thorough observation and was best tested by controlled experiments. Empiricism assumes that all observers experience the same reality, and because reality was deemed stable, an identified knowledge gap could be separately researched and findings re-introduced seamlessly.

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contention. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 91–95; and others referred to separately. The word “paradigm” is used to refer to the philosophical assumptions or to the basic set of beliefs that guide the actions and define the worldview of the researcher (Lincoln et al. 2011)

[3] Empiricism is a philosophical view that all concepts originate in experience. It holds that true knowledge or justification comes only or primarily from sensory experience and empirical evidence. One strand of empiricism assumes that generalisable knowledge comes from systematic controlled observation, and if possible from controlled experiments . See. www.britannica.com/topic/Empiricism also For more extended discussion of the development of empiricism, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empiricism

In the twentieth Century, philosopher Karl Popper[4] argued that scientific empiricism can never prove a theory or explanation true; it can only deal with theories that can be disproven, given its inherent inductive nature. We can know what knowledge claims are false, but all other claims to knowledge, given the nature of knowledge based on observations (inductive logic), are provisional. None can be asserted as certain or even probably true.

With the advent of the 20th Century, relativity, quantum mechanics, holism, and complex adaptive systems theory have progressively overwhelmed traditional positivist deterministic thinking. Constructive realism emerged in which reality is perceived to be imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible through the biased perspectives of the individual observers. Constructive realism recognises that all experience of the real world is constrcuted and subject to potential error, so scepticism is valued and drives the ongoing search for an improved understanding of reality.

Figure 1: Duck or rabbit? It's a matter of perspective.

The duck/rabbit image above, used by Kuhn[5], highlights the importance of the observer's perspective. Which animal "appears" to be depicted depends on what the viewer focuses on. The image can be perceived as two different realities despite being the same. Thus, we can be wrong about reality in ways that can be explained. Perspective and biases limit what each individual is aware of; however, drawing on multiple perspectives improves the quality of what can be inferred. Further, identifying and accounting for bias also can enhance our perceptual limits.

When dealing with social situations and human behaviour, different participants can and often will have different

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[4] Popper, K.R. (1959) *The Logic of scientific discovery,* London, Hutchinson

[5]The concept of a paradigm was introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Chicago University Press. Paradigms are a useful way of thinking about the entities and their relationships that comprise whatever is being considered.

experiences and perspectives, arriving at possibly contradictory accounts of the social reality in which they participate.[6] In the late 20th Century, the evolving relativistic view of reality led qualitative research methodology to grow beyond being solely positioned as preliminary to quantitative research. It was recognised as a separate legitimate research approach to deal with data-rich, non-deterministic, complex, dynamic situations, typical in leadership research.

Pragmatic constructivism argues that incorporating multiple observer perspectives allows us to reach a broader agreement regarding perceived reality, and a shared belief about some object or state of affairs can result, given:

- Beliefs are part of networks of interrelated beliefs.[7]
- These beliefs are continuously augmented through interaction that increases the induced networks of shared knowledge.
- Induced insights can only be transferred from an original context to other sufficiently similar contexts.[8]
- In turbulent, rapidly evolving social and business contexts, we can only propose and jointly act confidently within relatively short-term planning/action cycles.

All the above, in a highly disrupted context, support the feasibility of identifying and securing a short-term, joint, perceptually-agreed account of reality.

Two possible research methodologies are suggested from which you could choose. They both seek to produce actionable results

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[6] As pointed out by Massimi (2022), differences in theoretical perspectives exist in physical and biological sciences as well as in psychology and sociology; her case studies illustrate how integrating different perspectives can be the basis for major progress in our understanding of reality.

[7] Transferability and dependability are two of the four criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research by Lincoln, Y.S, and Guba, E. G., (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, and in relation to case study research by: Fuchs, O., and Robinson, C. (2023) Operationalising critical realism for case study research *Qualitative Research Journal, 24*(3): 245-266.

[8] Grayling A.C. (2008) *Scepticism and the possibility of knowledge* London, Bloomsbury, pps 184-203

as a consequence of the research rather than contribute to existing knowledge or draw conclusions from datasets.

1. **Participatory Action Research**: This research method requires the researcher to jointly dialogue with other leadership team members (or a representative group) to identify and agree on issue identification and resolution action by dialoguing to develop a shared leadership team's view. The research methodology involves three stages –

   Stage one – Given a pre-prepared Context Review briefing document, the leadership team brainstorms to identify possible strategic issues that may need to be dealt with in the specified period ahead. After brainstorming, eliminate redundant issues, issues beyond the organisation's control and issues likely to self-resolve.

   Stage two – Jointly identify by induction inter-relationships between identified issues. Then, identify issue clusters, utilising either a clustering procedure or inductive judgement. If possible, isolate one critical issue cluster.

   Stage three – For the identified critical issue set, dialogue as necessary to arrive at a shared agreed resolution strategy

2. **Aspirational Action Research:** In Aspirational Leadership, all that typically needs to be agreed upon jointly must be separately agreed upon (shared, core, prioritised values, preferred leadership behaviour and organisational purpose). In other areas, leadership will have been given autonomy to act as they believe necessary.

   Aspirational leadership could then follow a learning cycle -

   1) Analyse the relevant strategic position by preparing relevant Strategic Arena Map(s)[9] to identify the critical strategic issue set and its internal cross-issue interrelationships.
   2) Abduce a proposed value, leadership behavioural and organisational purpose supporting issue resolution action.

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[9] See Fayed, R. (2023) *Aspirational Leadership: A Personalised Approach to Making the Future Happen Meaningfully*. Australian Graduate School of Leadership, Chapter 4 pps 63-77

3) Field tests of the proposed action.
4) Reflect on the outcome of testing.
5) If there is a favourable outcome, proceed with further action identification or commercialisation. If the test is unfavourable, return to step 1.

However, like other qualitative research methods, the action research methods have very limited generalisability and are typically challenging to replicate. They also have a high risk of confirmation bias.[10] These disadvantages are deemed acceptable, given the short-term action they facilitate through dialoguing or iteration.

Therefore, the ontological, epistemological and axiological tenet proposed by pragmatic constructivism and adopted by aspirational researchers ensures that the (specified) PCLP-related actions adopted within the leadership system are compatible with the leadership team's core values, leading to an enhanced competitive position.

In conclusion:

- A pragmatic constructivist research paradigm philosophy and methodology are proposed for business leadership research.
- The proposed research paradigm ontology views knowledge of reality as the consequence of multiple perspectives.
- The proposed research epistemology is based on a process for securing appropriate resolution action through either collaborative action research or an aspirational iterative action research methodology.
- Research methods deployed draw on whatever research methods best address the required resolution action-related research questions.
- The proposed axiology ensures that the leadership team's shared prioritised core values guide the development of all intended resolution actions.

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[10] A researcher forms a personal hypothesis or belief and uses collected data to confirm that belief while dismissing evidence that does not support it.