**VISTAS Online** is an innovative publication produced for the American Counseling Association by Dr. Garry R. Walz and Dr. Jeanne C. Bleuer of Counseling Outfitters, LLC. Its purpose is to provide a means of capturing the ideas, information and experiences generated by the annual ACA Conference and selected ACA Division Conferences. Papers on a program or practice that has been validated through research or experience may also be submitted. This digital collection of peer-reviewed articles is authored by counselors, for counselors. **VISTAS Online** contains the full text of over 500 proprietary counseling articles published from 2004 to present.

**VISTAS** articles and **ACA Digests** are located in the ACA Online Library. To access the ACA Online Library, go to [http://www.counseling.org/](http://www.counseling.org/) and scroll down to the LIBRARY tab on the left of the homepage.

- Under the Start Your Search Now box, you may search by author, title and key words.
- The ACA Online Library is a member’s only benefit. You can join today via the web: counseling.org and via the phone: 800-347-6647 x222.

**Vistas™** is commissioned by and is property of the American Counseling Association, 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304. No part of Vistas™ may be reproduced without express permission of the American Counseling Association. All rights reserved.

Join ACA at: [http://www.counseling.org/](http://www.counseling.org/)
Authors of leadership literature agree that the recognition one possesses about their leadership qualities is key for becoming a leader. Without self-awareness of one’s leadership abilities, self-identity as a leader does not form (Bennis, 2003; Higher Education Research Institute; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Saunders, 2002; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer & Hogg, 2004, Wheatley, 1996). How does a potential leader come to know the heart and courage of the leader within? Researchers seem to agree: becoming an effective leader is a process one emerges from rather than one arrived at, however, very little is known about what starts the process, what steps the process takes, and how leadership identity results from
the process. The purpose of this paper is to summarize relevant leadership identity models and propose a new model describing how the leadership identity process might unfold.

**Leadership Theory and Consciousness of Self**

*Social Change Model of Leadership Development Guidebook.* The Social Change Model of Leadership Development Guidebook, developed by student affairs professionals to enhance student leadership development, presents a cumulative model of leadership (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996, p.1). According to the model, effective leadership is characterized by the ability to facilitate positive changes (1996, p.1). Before a leader can be a positive force, however, he must have a well-developed sense of self. When a leader understands and appreciates their own talents and contributions then she can approach leadership with equality, trust, empathy, and integrity; and recognize the talents and contributions of others (1996, p. 6).

The social change model consists of three levels, individual, group, and community/society—each level having its unique values. The primary level is the Individual, with the values of *consciousness of self*, *congruence* and *commitment*.

The group level builds on self-awareness in leadership as a relational process dependent on the interactions of people working together to accomplish change (Bennis, 2003; Covey, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Northouse, 2004; Pearson, 1998’ Popper, 2005, Sims & Lorenzi, 1992, Wheatley, 1996). The group level values include *common*
purpose, collaboration, and controversy with civility. The third level in the model addresses participation in the community/society. Although this perspective does not specifically address multicultural or diversity issues, the notion of leadership being an outcome of self awareness implies the importance of heterogeneity both in self and in others. This is true if leadership involves galvanizing the values of a diverse group to create positive change. Identity and multicultural theorists agree on the importance of developing one’s ethnic identity as the first step in understanding and appreciating the diversity of others (Cross, 1996; Josselson, 1987; Phinney, 1989).

The Social Change Model promotes the idea that if one is participating in and understanding their contributions, she is also appreciating the diversity of the group and the similar contributions of others. This feedback loop empowers the leader and in turn, each member of the group is empowered.

*The Importance of Self Awareness in Leadership*

As the Social Change Model suggests successful leadership is grounded in the extent to which the leader, through a process of self-exploration and understanding, develops a leadership identity. Because the potential for leadership starts with the individual’s discovery of his or her potential, the following discussion will focus on the importance of developing the self as a precursor to successful leadership (Bennis, 2003; Covey, 1989; Northouse, 2004; Pearson, 1998; Popper, 2005, Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; and Wheatley, 1996).
The Self

One’s approach to the world is the cumulative effect of his past, as well as a future perspective. When things happen that are perceived positively, they are called experience. When experiences are negative or hurt, they are called baggage. Both experience and baggage help to determine who the person is and how she approaches the world. Bennis (2003) in his book, *On Becoming A Leader* discusses this same idea by saying leaders are products of everything within their entire lives. He suggests a leader is someone who takes in all their experiences and creates a new self. A new self may be an exaggeration—an expanded sense of self is a more likely conclusion. (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 1998; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer & Hogg, 2004).

How one perceives himself helps to create self-concept and identity. Wheatley (1996) put the discovery of the self more holistically by saying one looks internally to see one another as resources for the discovery of self.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to what the individual believes about her own ability (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer & Hogg, 2004). This concept of self-efficacy is the belief he will be able to perform and achieve the goal (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer & Hogg, 2004). This concept of self-efficacy is an internal idea one can organize and execute a plan of action. The person has to believe in her capacity and she has to see her own leadership potential before they can lead effectively. No matter what face one presents to others the notion of how one
looks at oneself will eventually come to fruition; in short, self perception is a crucial aspect.

Sims and Lorenzi (1992) discuss two facets of self-efficacy. The first is one’s perception (strong or weak) about ability. The other facet addresses the accuracy of prediction or self-trust. Self-efficacy is future oriented; the historical incidents determine future success or opportunity. It is about motivation and the need for self-determination and accepting responsibility for co-creating the group (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 1998). Tenacity leads to mastery and the outcome is the knowledge added to one’s self schema (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992). Leadership self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own ability to lead (Popper, 2005, p. 65). This is based on experience and Bandura has shown self-efficacy is strengthened by successes in relative areas (Popper, 2005, p. 65). In their article Van Kippenberg et al (2004, p. 833) cites a number of authors who reveal self-efficacy is related to career choice, training proficiencies, learning, achievement, task persistence and goal directed behavior. The contributions of the individual to the group are related to their self-efficacy and the effectiveness of the group and their organizational outcomes.

**Leadership and Identity Theory**

*Erik Erikson*

Erik Erikson (1980) explained Freud’s stages in terms of eight ego developmental stages of life and he expanded the discussion beyond the adolescent; stage five addresses identity (i.e., identity v. role confusion). All of the stages of Erikson’s theory have an X
versus Y approach to show the normal and desired outcome versus the negative aspects of development. Erikson considered it difficult to sustain a stable life if the individual had failed to secure this sense of identity. He cites evidence and uses examples to substantiate identity is a culmination of biographical, developmental, clinical and social points of view and uses the stages to explain how one achieves identity. According to Erikson, identity and learning continue through life echoing that developing self identity is an ongoing process in a developing psyche.

James Marcia

James Marcia’s (1966, 1993) work in the area of identity development is based on the Erikson theory. He expanded Erikson’s ideas suggesting identity is a culmination of the past and foresight into the future. The person synthesizes past experiences and is able to anticipate future success, or a similar iteration (1993). He states, *thenotion of identity is one’s idea of who one is and how one defines oneself* (1993, p. 3). Marcia posits the structural aspect is tied to the Erikson stages related to one’s age. The behavioral aspect is the observable behavior-based components of the identity process (1993); and the phenomenological aspect of the person is related to the person becoming more aware of his experience, characteristics, and position (1993). In other words, *the experience of having an identity is that one has a core, a center that is oneself, to which experience and action can be referred* (1993, p. 7).

Leadership and the Psychodynamic Theory

The psychodynamic approach to leadership mirrors the Social Change Model in terms of
the focus on understanding the self to respond to the group’s needs effectively. Adherents to this approach, (i.e., Freud and Jung) believed leaders are effective when they understand their psychological makeup (the self) which helps leaders better understand others (Northouse, 2004). Understanding how one makes decisions, takes in information, and views the world then one becomes aware of their processes and can appreciate how others differ in certain areas.

The Group’s Contribution to Individual Identity

Chaos and Complexity Theory

One may identify herself differently depending on the context or social setting. The self is not unidimensional; but a lifelong journey. The self is dynamic and encompasses forward moving energy based on experience and self-efficacy. This improves the ability to meet future challenges. American culture is focused on the individual; both language and way of thinking are I focused. As Komives, et al (1998) point out, English is the only language in which the word I is capitalized. This culture of you can do it, rather, I can do it teeters on the fine line of ego. Americans are acculturated to build their ego and have an ego through a collective approach to individualism, but not too much or one is seen as egotistical. The contribution a group makes to an individual’s self-discovery is critical to understanding the leader’s identity process. Chaos theory may help to illustrate this process.

Briefly, Chaos theory explains there is a pattern with some random events. Similarly, in a leadership context it is important to look at the whole society, the whole group and the
whole person to understand the self. The whole person is the sum total of their past and a result of his environment (internal and external) forces, their current view of themselves. This is known in Chaos theory as the sensitive dependence on initial conditions, it is one’s identity to date. It assumes the multiplicities of all life’s variances are random, yet establish an order or script (pattern) over time. As systems alternatingly stretch and fold back on themselves in self-reinforcing loops, a pattern of growth gets established whereby a leader learns from the group and in turn teaches the group (Van Eenwyk, 1991). This feedback from other group members is useful to the leader in approaching a problem differently next time a similar situation arises.

The leader is constantly reorganizing their experience into scripts and patterns. This system of life matures and develops with the realizations there is order to apparent randomness. The philosophical theory of solipsism says everything that exists emanates from within the self (Bothamley, 2002), pointing to the importance of understanding one’s place in the overall system through self-awareness.

**The Leadership Identity Model**

Leaders do not jump valence from group member to leader—they emerge from a process of self-exploration; this is a point all the above-mentioned theorists agree. To date, leadership identity research has focused on the fact that leadership is a process, but the critical elements of the process and how they mesh to produce leader identity has not been the focus. The proposed Leadership Identity Model offers one idea of the shape and
The Leadership Identity Model is comprised of five stages configured in the shape of a figure 8 (see Appendix A). The stages include 1) Potential, 2) Testing, 3) Catalyst, 4) Acceptance-Kinetic, and 5) Synthesis.

**Potential.** This stage begins when someone realizes or thinks he has the potential to assume a leadership position. This potential arises from an inner desire, previous experiences, or someone told them they have what it takes to lead. The impetus for this stage could be the opportunity to run for office, being promoted within an organization, or from assuming more responsibility in some capacity. In other words, the process of developing a leader identity begins when someone begins assessing their desire and ability to step into a leadership position. This assessment lays the groundwork for the next stage of building a leadership identity, or testing.

**Testing.** The testing stage is characterized by an individual’s attempt to establish their leaderness. This early period of leadership is spent getting to know the members and the way organizational operations. As the person gradually accepts they are a leader, they might attempt to create change and use the group’s consent/dissent to gauge their effectiveness. For example, the new department chairman might create new policies related to vacation pay or sick leave. Depending on the person, early feedback from the group can be crucial to the new leader’s future. If during the testing stage a leader tries something and fails in their attempt to make changes, he could foreclose on the
leadership endeavor and accept an alternate role or let others guide their development. Again, one’s self efficacy of the individual determines whether the leader retreats, gives in, or continues to the next stage.

*The Catalyst.* The defining point of a leader’s identity will be marked by a catalyst. The catalyst could be the butterfly effect describing how a small change in one area can result in large changes elsewhere. The catalyst may be an incident, a word, a decision—something that confirms *I am a leader.* The event could be as simple as taking a small risk in the testing stage (i.e., changing an established meeting time) or something as big as cutting benefit packages. The catalyst has the potential to strengthen one’s self efficacy by creating conditions for an inner struggle between an old and new identity.

*Acceptance.* The acceptance or kinetic stage is based on kinetic energy (i.e., an object in motion tends to stay in motion). Success from the catalyst provides an extra sense of energy, a renewal of the spirit. The leader is forever changed, expanded, and validated by the sense of accomplishment. She is more comfortable with decisions and has a stronger sense of self and assuredness in her actions/decisions. The self-efficacy of the leader becomes acknowledged by the group (either explicitly or as subtle agreement) and, more importantly, by the leader him or herself. Self-esteem has probably increased and she acknowledges her leadership ability; her comfort zone has expanded. The realization of one’s ability may be a sudden awakening to the fact that he accomplished something. Multiple successes within the leadership process help improve their self-esteem will likely add to their self-concept (Popper, 2005). Moving to acceptance is the sense of
accomplishment and may be a seemingly non-event because it is just something one does, it is part of their identity. The catalyst and the acceptance stage will probably seem to be together.

*Synthesis.* Once a new leader has accepted their new identity, they begin to synthesize the psychological changes that have taken place and eventually add to their existing sense of self (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996, Marica, 1966; Phinney, 1989). Here the new leader is able to use their expanded wisdom to address future situations. At each new situation, the leader cycles back to earlier stages and seeing the current situation with an expanded perspective incorporating all experience and wisdom. In other words, the leader is in constant psychological motion throughout the process. Each time he travels through model there is more experience and confidence as they assimilate the knowledge and skill they gained with each iteration.

The line between kinetic acceptance and synthesis is probably a blurry separation for each individual. As one develops confidence based on earlier success and realizes these experiences apply to current situations, they assimilate the experience, knowledge, and confidence into a broadened sense of self

**The Shape and Texture of the Model**

The unique shape of the proposed model emphasizes the fluidity of the process of becoming a leader. Visually the figure eight suggests a nonlinear pattern. The model is also two “S” shaped, harmonic waves energy waves (Woolf, 2003) indicating a dynamic
process. The catalyst is purposely at the nexus; it implies the incident will have meaning again in the future. Similarly, the synthesis stage lies on the route back to the catalyst further implying a leader never stops evolving. A leader is someone who recognizes opportunity and continually learns, evaluates, and grows through the process described above. As she moves from one stage to the next, self-awareness and identity grow stronger until the self and the identity synthesize into one.

The figure-8 is the symbol for infinity. The concept of infinity implies things are boundless and timeless. The actions of a leader may have impact throughout the individual’s life. The identity of the leader and the concept of leadership are cumulative and repetitive. If synergy says the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then over time the stages work together to help shape the leader’s identity. Alas, identity is more than a sum of parts. Identity is a gestalt, or a pattern not derivable from the sum of its parts.

**Suggestions for Future Study**

This presentation is limited by the fact that it is theoretical and conceptual based. The assumptions of multicultural applications are tentative as well. Future research on this model should be conducted with regard to leadership positions, cultures, and ages. Exploring the aspects of identity occurring over the lifespan to determine if catalyst themes occur for leaders of varied experience or longevity would be interesting.

**Final Comments**
By focusing on the process of leader identity we can better understand when and how to enhance the leadership development training. It appears that someone must begin with the potential to identify as a leader. During the experiences and crisis moments decisions are made that strengthen and expand identity. At some point, a defining moment (catalyst) creates the point of expansion. According to the individual leader identity model proposed above, leadership is developed, not discovered. By understanding the leader identity process, we can better understand how to nurture leadership and make the process more productive.

References


**Appendix A**

The Leadership identity model
VISTAS 2007 Online

As an online only acceptance, this paper is presented as submitted by the author(s). Authors bear responsibility for missing or incorrect information.