



Full Length Research Article

THE SNOWBALL EFFECT: SPIRALING ONE SIMPLE IDEA INTO PROFITABLE RESEARCH PROJECTS

¹Dr. Richard Schuttler and ²Dr. Elisabeth Musil

¹University of Phoenix

²Walden University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exposition research is to provide a reflection of one logical, sound, and systematic approach of how to convert qualitative information to a quantitative Likert-type survey. The research process of data collection and data analysis revealed within provides reflections of an understanding of how one not need not have a grandiose vision in a formalized research agenda to conduct research where its outcomes can serve others in meaningful ways. The implications of the information contained recommends how one small research effort can lead into many unknowable publications that can serve others in many significant ways as well as one's own research agenda. Finally, should a researcher have a passion for a topic, doing small exercises can be an enjoyable and developmental tool for data collection.

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INTRODUCTION

What follows is an overview of how a simple idea from a classroom exercise became a qualitative research project, then was extended to a published book, a simple self-assessment tool, and finally into a new partially designed 360-degree quantitative Likert-type survey. The essence of this article is to share how easy it can be to conduct research and to add value to serve others through one's research. The article is also an attempt to reflect how simple research can be and not be a long, cumbersome process as viewed by many first-time and journey level researchers. This information might also be helpful for understanding a simple approach to convert qualitative research findings into quantitative research data collection instruments.

One Day in the Classroom

Something that started as a one time, 1-hour classroom exercise in a doctoral residency leadership course evolved into a recurring exercise over a 2-year period while helping many small groups of people. The leadership course is an advanced curriculum designed to help students nearing the third year of a doctoral leadership-based program.

**Corresponding author: Dr. Richard Schuttler,
University of Phoenix.*

The program provides students opportunities for self-reflection and self-improvement moving forward toward the end of the doctoral journey. Literally, one can metaphorically ponder the snowball going downhill collecting more snow and getting bigger and bigger as exactly what happened from that classroom exercise to produce different research supported outcomes. Students went outside for 15 minutes and sought a quiet place to think about who in their life was a leader hero to them. Criteria included someone students know, or knew, literally, and well. The person could be living or deceased, but the goal was to identify the one person who represented the number one leader in students' lives. Students were to come back with the person's name, describe the person's relationship to them, and reveal three leadership characteristics (one word or a hyphenated word) that made this person stand out among all the others as their leader hero. When students returned to their classroom, each shared their answers to the three questions. As a class, the group captured all the individual characteristic on a dry-erase board and recorded the information in a shared Microsoft Word document. When there were duplicate characteristics from one student to the next, they reflected terms as repetitive words. The identified leadership characteristics were the baseline throughout the rest of the course as attributes to illustrate leaders. As related discussions occurred in the classroom from day-to-day, the students referred to these traits. The underlying assumption was students could emulate the identified traits to become

better leaders without having to read leadership theories or self-help books.

The Beginning of Something

At the outset, there was no intention of writing a book or publishing research articles when those classroom exercises occurred. Over time, all the related files were saved. These data also came from conducting entrepreneurial workshops on weekends, talking with many people, asking the same three questions, and recording the answers. After 2 years, with over 1,000 responses from men and women, from different lifestyles and occupations, in different cities and countries, all the lists were merged into a single document.

She appeared to him as the most caring person he knew, and the student was subsequently asked to author the chapter titled Caring. The selection of other individuals continued, using the same process of offering an invitation to write other characteristic chapters, except for the chapter on the Teacher characteristics. Schuttler decided to author the chapter on Teacher characteristics as an experienced

Initially, there was no goal for the compiled results document, but as the data appeared useful to others, the accumulation of records continued. Subsequently, the data set was ranked using a popular spreadsheet software program. The software allowed for listing all the characteristics from the most to least frequent.



Figure 1. Leader Word Cloud

discussions. After sharing the illustrative data with many peers, a vision materialized to take the qualitative research and its findings to share with a wider audience. The concept included writing a book about the 10 most frequent leadership characteristics. Commencing with a manuscript outline, the determination was that the design of the book (The book title is *Everyday Leader Heroes: 10 Leadership Characteristics in Everyday People*) would contain an introduction chapter and then one chapter for each of the 10 most frequent leadership characteristics. From a previously authored book, *Laws of Communication: Intersection Where Leadership Meets Employee Performance* with supplemental authors, modeling the new leadership book after the previously successful design. The value of multiple contributing authors offers distinctive and unique perspectives, as compared to the contribution of a single author.

After much thought, Schuttler (the main author in this article) decided to identify leaders whom he knew demonstrates true reflections of each of the 10 characteristics, and invited them to write a chapter for the new leadership book. For example, Schuttler was mentoring a doctoral student who is a nurse, on her doctoral dissertation.

Over 50 leadership attributes were ranked, with the frequency of each characteristic displayed. That list was submitted to a free online tool to generate a Word Cloud to create a graphical display of the data (Wordle, 2014). See Figure 1 for the results (the larger the font, the more frequent the word was repeated, so the smaller the font, the less frequent the word was repeated).

From Cloud to Book: The Word Cloud graphic provided data for follow-up dynamic classroom and social media teacher of adults since 1994. The first chapter in the book, titled “What are Everyday Leader Heroes?” established reflections of Schuttler’s leadership lived-experiences and philosophies. Dr. Dennis Clodi wrote a chapter reflecting a leadership model derived from the data collected from the 10 most frequent leadership characteristics. The resulting leadership model became the second chapter titled, “Success by Design.”

A Self-Assessment Tool is Born

As the chapters for the book came in from the contributing authors, Schuttler read each manuscript, realizing similar threads or themes emerged in each chapter, all reflecting upon each of the common leadership characteristics.

Table 1

Self-Assessment Tool

		Today's Score	1-Year Goal
1	Supportive Provides help, information, empathy, and encouragement. Gives time freely to help others. Creates a loving and nurturing environment.		
2	Listener Intentional listener. Attends closely for the purpose of understanding. Present to conversations. Focuses on what the other has to say.		
3	Caring Assists others when they are troubled. Makes provisions and watches out for others. Shows compassion or concern about life's problems and solutions.		
4	Humble Not overly proud or arrogant. Modest, courteous, respectful. Does not view oneself as being above or better than others.		
5	Integrity Adheres to moral and ethical principles. Possesses soundness of moral character and good sense of direction in life, adhering to these in good and bad times. Executes moral convictions. Upholds the truth. Not persuaded solely by money or personal gain.		
6	Knowledgeable Possesses or exhibits awareness in career, spirituality, mind, body, and other life matters. Insightful. Demonstrates wisdom and passion for ongoing learning. Well-informed and discerning.		
7	Motivator Creates an atmosphere for others to be self-motivated. Provides incentives and encourages others. Offers guidance free from value judgments. Helpful.		
8	Mentor Role model, coach. Shows subject matter expertise. Helps others. Wise and trusted counselor. Influential sponsor or supporter. Extremely positive. Cares about people. Instructs others in a beneficial and informative manner. Patient, understanding.		
9	Teacher Inspires learning. Instructor or facilitator of knowledge. Caring. Leaves lifelong impressions. Freely shares experiences with others for their benefit.		
10	Positive Great outlook. Optimistic. Encourages others. Confident in one's opinion or assertion. Constructive and fully assured. Not skeptical. Showing or expressing approval or agreement. Favorable, supportive.		
		Total:	

Table 2

Description of Characteristics in Self-Assessment

Characteristic	Description
Supportive	Provides help, information, empathy, and encouragement. Gives time freely to help others. Creates a loving and nurturing environment.
Listener	Intentional listener. Attends closely for the purpose of understanding. Present to conversations. Ability to focus on what another is communicating regardless of medium.
Caring	Assists others when they are troubled. Makes provisions and watches out for others. Shows compassion or concern about life's problems and solutions.
Humble	Not overly proud or arrogant. Modest. Courteous. Respectful. Does not view one's self above or better than others.
Integrity	Adheres to moral and ethical principles. Soundness of moral character. Good sense of direction in life and adheres in good and bad times. Executes moral convictions. Upholds the truth. Not persuaded solely by money, crime, or personal gain.
Knowledgeable	Possessing or exhibiting awareness in career, spirituality, mind, body, and other life matters. Insightful. Demonstrates wisdom and passion for ongoing learning. Well-informed. Discerning.
Motivator	Creates atmosphere for others to be self-motivated. Provides incentives. Encourages others. Offers guidance free from value judgments. Helpful.
Mentor	Role model. Coach. Shows subject matter expertise. Helps others. Wise and trusted counselor. Influential sponsor or supporter. Extremely positive. Cares about people. Instructs others in a beneficial and informative manner. Patient. Understanding.
Teacher	Inspires learning. Instructor or facilitator of knowledge. Caring. Left lifelong impressions. Freely shares experience with others for their benefit.
Positive	Great outlook. Optimistic. Encourages others. Confident in opinion or assertion. Constructive and fully assured. Not skeptical. Showing or expressing approval or agreement. Favorable. Supportive.

The decision at that point was enough information existed to create a new self-assessment tool based on common leadership characteristics. Schuttler had been working on another similar type of self-assessment tool in entrepreneurial workshops created by another professional; however, the emerging self-assessment model was adopted as a replacement leadership assessment tool because of its phenomenological value. The intent was to create an easy to use a self-assessment tool where one can quickly and easily score themselves for each of the 10 leadership characteristics on a scale of 1 to 10. The design of the self-assessment was in a manner providing leaders who completed the self-assessment the opportunity to decide where they want to be 12 months from the time they took the self-assessment regarding each characteristic. This is a conventional approach when mentoring executives, to help create a plan for self-improvement. See Table 1 for the self-assessment tool.

Moving from Qualitative to Quantitative Research

Based on feedback from the published book and self-assessment tool, a later determination was that creating a new 360-degree feedback assessment would be beneficial. The conceptual framework of the new assessment tool was the 10 leadership characteristics, as they may be useful to leaders in entrepreneurial, academic, administrative, and corporate organizations. The self-assessment tool provided the needed information to develop the 360-degree feedback assessment tool. Having the necessary information, the next step was to take 10 leadership characteristics and author a Likert-type survey instrument for the first part of a 360-degree assessment tool. A 360-degree assessment is commonly designed for an individual to have a variety of data points with which to self-assess.

Those data points often are:

- Their own self-assessment
- One from their supervisor
- A synthesized input from two or more peers
- A synthesized input from two or more subordinates

Authoring a Likert-Type Survey: A Likert-type survey of 55 questions was drafted based on the 10 leadership characteristics. Combined into one survey instrument, the drafted survey was pilot tested with 104 participants to determine if the Likert-type questions made sense, and if discrepancies existed with understanding each question. Feedback received assisted with refining the survey items and to eliminate redundant questions by seven; thus, leaving the final total of 48 questions. In the survey, there is an average of four related Likert-type survey questions for each of the 10 top 10 leadership characteristics.

Data Analysis—Leadership Assessment Tool

The purpose of this research was to evaluate ranked self-assessed leadership characteristics of effective organizational leaders. The data can support self-reflection of leadership success. A Likert-type scale questionnaire was used to understand the topic. Management and organizational leaders with significant experience completed the self-assessment to rank the leadership characteristics each believed they possess. After summarizing the data, the following describes the study sample and reveals the results. The research question of What are the ranked leadership characteristics self-assessed by management leaders in organizations? was determined through

a Likert-type scale questionnaire with 48 dispersed questions assessing 10 core leadership characteristics. The survey was administered online as a pilot test, with participants identified and recruited via snowball sampling. A total of 103 participants completed the survey in the 15-day pilot test period. The 10 core leadership characteristics self-evaluated by the participants are caring, humble, integrity, knowledgeable, listener, mentor, motivator, positive, supportive, and teacher. Table 2 contains the descriptions of each leadership characteristic as self-assessed by the population in the pilot study.

Range of Disbursement between Questions

Measurements of each characteristic on the survey included answering 4 to 5 related Likert-type questions. The Likert-type scale used included the possible responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The data from the participant responses were analyzed to determine, for illustrative purposes, the range of disbursement between questions, the results by characteristics, and finally, the rank by characteristics. The resulting data offered a dispersed range of responses analyzed by question. Table 3 illustrates the most dispersed range of responses learned in the pilot study. Approximately 75% (n = 77) of participants strongly agreed they are resistant to persuasion by money or crime, illustratively 95% (n = 98) strongly agreed or agreed their resistance. Only about 22% (n = 23) assessed themselves strongly as a patient person, with 70% (n = 72) strongly agreed or agreed they are patient. These two questions display a descriptive disbursement of question responses.

Table 3
Illustration of Dispersed Range of Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
To what extent do you agree you resist persuasion by money or crime?	74.76%	20.39%	3.88%	0.00%	0.97%
To what extent do you agree you are a patient person?	22.33%	47.57%	16.50%	10.68%	2.91%

Results by Characteristics

The data collected by participant responses were coded by each characteristic providing an aggregate view of participant self-assessed strengths and weaknesses.



Figure 2. Highest self-reflected leadership characteristic in pilot study.

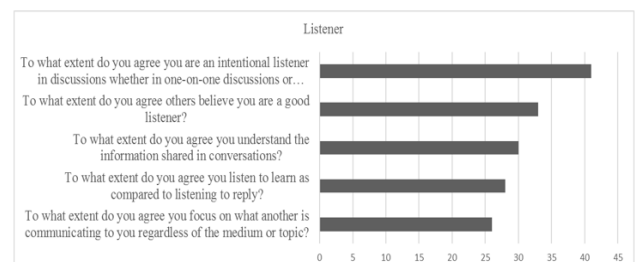


Figure 3. Lowest self-reflected leadership characteristic in pilot study.

Each of the 10 leadership characteristics provided insight to participant group aggregate beliefs. Figure 2 and Figure 3 display examples of the most and least highly self-reflected agreed upon leadership characteristics.

Rank by Characteristics

The data collected in the pilot study were further ranked by characteristic, illustrating the overall self-assessment results by the entire participant group of leaders. The 10 characteristics were coded by the response of strongly agree, to potentially display the self-assessed mastery in each characteristic measured. Figure 4 displays the ranked results of the pilot study for illustrative purposes. The data analysis formulated in the chart presents the 10 leadership characteristics ranked by frequency of strongly agree responses by each attribute. As formulated, the strongest trait self-assessed by the participants in the pilot study was integrity, followed by teaching, then positivity. The greatest opportunity for improvement for the population is the lowest traits of listening skills, mentorship skills, and caring.

Conclusion

The authors' intentions for this article are to share an example of how a simple idea can snowball into different research projects. Additionally, an outcome for this information provides the potential for readers to understand better how easy research can be and the potential benefit of one's research to serve others.

Finally, a deficit of knowledge appears to exist between novice and seasoned researchers on how to convert qualitative information to a Likert-type survey for applying quantitative research data. The findings revealed in this article also provides an understanding of the addressed applications, that one need not have a grandiose vision in a formalized research agenda to conduct research. One small research effort can lead into many unknowable publications that can serve others in many ways as well as one's own research agenda. Finally, should a researcher have a passion for a topic, doing small exercises can be an enjoyable and developmental tool for data collection.

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