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## Assessment Framework for Next–Level Leadership Role Readiness in Retail Middle Management

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to propose a next-level-leadership-role-readiness assessment framework for use in retail management. A qualitative-participatory approach was used for the research, with data collected using appreciative-inquiry-based interviews with middle managers in the retail industry (n = 20) and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The findings identified eight core competencies: strategic implementation, time management, people development, professional proficiency, entrepreneurship, commitment, change management, and innovation. These core competencies were drawn from the content analysis inter-coding and reviewed by the experts to develop a drafted framework for next-level leadership role readiness assessment. The draft framework includes competencies, other factors to be measured, a recommended implementation approach, and an approach for integrating the leadership role readiness assessment into the career development path of managers within the organization. The study focused on retail middle manager level based in Thailand. The results provide practical insights into how organizations can assess leadership readiness in a consistent and standardized way, offering a significant benefit. Further opportunities for research include implementing and testing the drafted framework and extending it to other organizational levels.

Keywords: leadership development, leadership competency, leadership readiness, leadership assessment

### Introduction

Leadership development is an essential part of the long-term performance and sustainability of the organization. In the leadership development process, the organization identifies potential organizational leaders and provides them with formal and informal opportunities for learning, development, and growth through leadership experience (Flinn, 2018). Research has shown that investment in leadership development gives the firm more competitive advantage in improving organizational performance than firms that do not use it (Weiss & Molinaro, 2010). Leadership development has also been associated with improved talent attraction and retention, the organizational culture of agility and performance, and better financial performance (Carter, 2015). At the same time, leadership development is a long-term initiative, which can take years to recognize results (Flinn, 2018). Furthermore, leadership development does not have a predefined end goal but is a continual process of

growth and development for those who undertake it (Northouse, 2019). As a result, many firms can struggle to see the value of leadership development since the costs of the process can be high (particularly in the beginning) (Flinn, 2018; Weiss & Molinaro, 2010).

One of the leadership development problems is that leadership role readiness assessment is both a challenging and relatively undeveloped aspect of organizational strategy. While there has been some research in this area, most interest has been focused on initial readiness assessment for entry into leadership development programs (Best, 2010; Maheshwari & Yadav, 2015; Santoso, Sudimin, & Elyadi, 2020). While these existing frameworks are useful for initial entry, they are not designed to assess whether individuals are ready to move on to new roles or higher stages of the leadership development program. They also do not assess performance and development opportunities in specific organizational competencies.

This research aims to propose a next-level leadership role readiness assessment framework for use in retail management. A case study of Thai retail is used to achieve this objective. The retail company, one of the largest in Thailand, employs around 10,000 people and has an active leadership development program that reaches all levels of the organization. However, one of its weakest areas is no standardized leadership-role-readiness assessment tool to identify readiness for progression through the leadership development program. This research was intended to fill this gap for the case organization and provide a framework for others with a similar need for assessment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Leadership Competencies**

Leadership competencies can be broadly defined as leaders' skills and knowledge to achieve their objectives (Northouse, 2019). In addition, leadership competencies are developmental, meaning that while new leaders start with a subset of competencies, they are expected to grow and change over time to take on increasingly challenging leadership tasks (Dai, Tang, & de Meuse, 2011). There were eight leadership competencies identified as critical for the case study.

### ***Strategic implementation***

The fundamental objective of leadership is to plan and implement strategy (Drucker, 1999). Strategic implementation can be broadly defined as the organizational process of establishing priorities, finding, and assigning resources, improving capabilities, aligning the efforts of stakeholders and participants, and responding to a changing environment in order to achieve the organization's priorities (Dyer, Godfrey, Jensen, & Bryce, 2020).

### ***People Management***

In order to be effective, leaders must be able to motivate, direct, align the activities of and develop individuals working with them towards achieving a common goal (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). This activity is the essence of people management or the leadership competencies involved in the motivation and direction of individuals (Alagaraja, Cumberland, & Choi, 2015). Although the term 'people management' does imply some degree of control, it can also be identified as one of the factors in organizational outcomes (Alagaraja et al., 2015).

### ***Entrepreneurship***

Entrepreneurial competencies include knowledge, skills, and abilities that allow entrepreneurs to achieve their objectives, including opportunity, relationship, conceptual, organizing, strategic, and commitment competencies (Robles & Zárraga-Rodríguez, 2015). Although it is slightly counterintuitive, entrepreneurial competencies are relevant in large organizations because they help them respond more rapidly to a changing competitive environment and improve competitive advantage (Ambad & Wahab, 2013).

### ***Change Management***

Change management is how leaders identify needed changes, organize resources and direct efforts to make the change, and create conditions where change will be accepted (McClman, Paton, & Siebert, 2015). However, change management can often be controversial and contested, with unclear roles and high resistance levels (Crawford & Nahmias, 2010). Thus, developing competencies such as planning, decision-making, and other relevance is critical for effective change management (Crawford & Nahmias, 2010).

### ***Time Management***

Time management is an issue of perpetual interest in leadership and management studies because of the relevance of time to the performance of the firm and individuals (Claessens, Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2007). At the leadership level, time management refers not just to the individual effectiveness of time use but also to analyzing time, planning and monitoring activities through time, and improving processes and activities to make use of time more efficient (Claessens et al., 2007).

### ***Professional Proficiency***

Professional proficiency is leaders' technical and professional competence in their day-to-day roles (Guskey, 2014). In addition, as Guskey (2014) noted, professional development planning incorporates collaborative learning, organizational structures, feedback, and the connection of tasks to individual and organizational goals (Guskey, 2014). Thus, professional proficiency ties the leader's everyday roles and activities to their leadership development activities.

### ***Organizational Commitment***

Organizational commitment refers to the extent to which the individual feels an emotional (affective) and social (normative) commitment to the organization or perceives barriers to leaving (continuance commitment) (Mullins, 2016). Studies have routinely shown that organizational commitment predicts employee satisfaction (Saridakis, Torres, & Johnstone, 2013), work motivation (Battistelli, Galletta, Portoghese, & Vandenberghe, 2013), and commitment to specific actions such as change (Becker, 2009). Additionally, organizational commitment is a known predictor of organizational loyalty and turnover intentions (Mullins, 2016).

### ***Innovation***

Innovation develops new products, processes, services, or phenomena (Rosenberg, 2010). Innovation can be incremental, resulting in relatively small changes to existing processes, but it can also be radical, resulting in completely new processes. Innovation is commonly associated with entrepreneurial leadership, but it is also used in the leadership of larger organizations (Northouse, 2019). Innovation has been previously identified as a set of core leadership competencies that develop over time (Dai et al., 2011).

Given the literature reviews of the selected variables, the theoretical framework was developed to illustrate the interdependent competencies of the leadership role whereby each competency does not have a specific order but all equally play an equal role in leadership readiness as per Figure 1

**Figure 1**

*Initial Framework of the Study*



### **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach to inquiring about organizational systems and functions, recognizing the organization's strengths (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The AI approach is not directed toward fixing problems or filling gaps in the organization but toward understanding and valuing what strengthens and creates well-functioning socio-technical systems that allow the organizations to achieve their goals (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Furthermore, this approach is grounded in positive psychology, which is an approach that views people and social environments not as something that is broken or requires fixing but as something positive and whole (Barrett & Fry, 2005). Thus, AI can be considered an optimistic approach to investigating the situation of organizations and processes, through which positive insights into how human systems work best can be achieved.

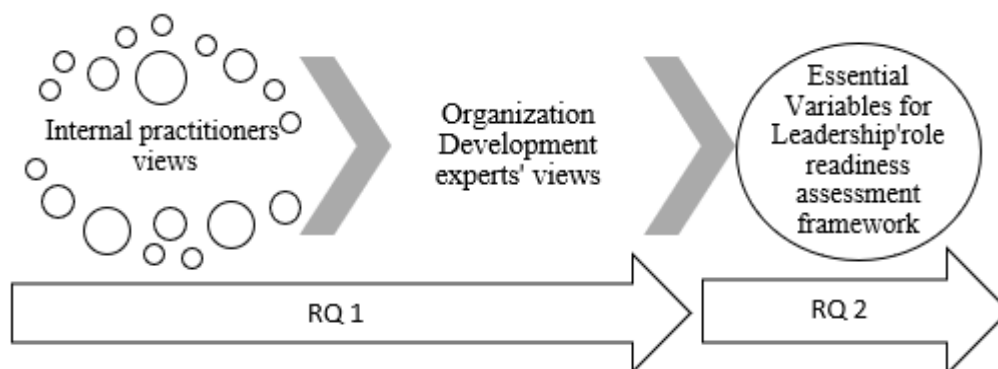
The Appreciative Inquiry process followed in this study is commonly characterized as the 5-D cycle (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2015). The *defining stage of the cycle is essentially* identifying the phenomenon while narrowing down what is being investigated. In the *discovery* stage, the organization's current state or process is described, including its strengths and how it has been used successfully. Next, in the *dream* stage, the conditions are imagined for the organization's future success, including multiple aspects of success. Then, in the *design* stage, the dream state of the organization is selected, and designs are made to help the organization achieve this ideal state. Finally, in *destiny* (or *delivery*), the designs are structured into action plans for implementation and monitoring (Stavros et al., 2015). This process is designed to help organizations fix perceived problems and continue to grow toward their ideal states (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Thus, it was appropriate for the present research, intended for exactly this purpose.

### Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 is the conceptual framework, aligned with two research questions.

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Framework*



As depicted above, the study begins by conducting interviews with key informants who are internal practitioners and organization development experts at the company. The conversation technique is an appreciative inquiry comprised of four interview questions. The researcher next presents a leadership-role-readiness assessment framework drawn from the perspectives of organization practitioners and experts

### Methodology

Appreciative inquiry is used in this research to conduct strategic conversations with two key informant groups: internal organization middle management practitioners and three organization development experts.

All interview passages were freely coded, grouped/categorized, and triangulated by coders who analyzed all interview passages in order to discover similar themes among the primary informants. The common motifs identified from practitioners and expert perspectives

are then compared to theoretical underpinnings for compatibility and consistency, culminating in the initial draft of the leadership-role-readiness assessment framework.

**Scope of Population**

The study examined the essential competencies of the middle management level, drawn from both the corporate headquarters and other branches. This study has a total population and sample size of n=20. The population is homogeneous by definition; all respondents also serve as key informants for the study's focus groups. Additionally, these target samples represent the organization's middle management. Purposive sampling was used in this investigation; the total accessible population was also included in the sample.

**Scope of Research Instrument**

This study's research instrument is the in-depth interview questions drawn from the concept of Appreciative Inquiry. Table 1 below illustrates the actual questions for the interview.

**Table 1**

*Appreciative-Inquiry Interview Questions for Internal Organization Practitioner*

<b>4D</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
D1 Discovery	When do you think of how we pursue our leadership’s role readiness assessment today, and what is considered working well for you and our business? To you, which competency is the most urgent need for talent development for the middle manager level of retails business; namely, strategic implementation, people development, entrepreneurship, change management, time management, professional proficiency, dedication, and commitment, and innovation?
D2 Dream	What are the essential variables or factors you see that could be incorporated into the leadership’s role readiness assessment framework for the future of leadership roles readiness of the middle managers?
D3 Design	How can we implement the leadership-role-readiness assessment framework to ensure the company’s maximum benefit, guaranteeing we eventually select the right talent for a broader responsible role? How can we ensure that consistent understanding, knowledge, and application of the use of leadership-role-readiness assessment?
D4 Destiny	Regarding timelines and frequent use of the leadership-role-readiness assessment, how often do you think we should use this? Why?

**Data Analysis**

All interview passages were transcribed and coded by three coders. Contents analysis started with categorizing, verifying, confirming, and developing themes.

The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to inquiry. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research oriented toward understanding the essential elements of a given

phenomenon or experience from the view of those who partake in it (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology is essentially interpretivism in nature, as its orientation is toward subjective inner realities rather than concrete or objective external realities (Khan, 2014). Phenomenology is also concerned predominantly with lived experience rather than external validation (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). Thus, it was a strong approach to investigating the leadership development process from the perspective of those involved in the research.

There were two phases to the research. In Phase 1, data were collected from internal organization practitioners, while Phase 2 collected data from external organization development experts.

**Phase 1.** Appreciative-inquiry interview with internal organization practitioner.

The key informants here are the internal organization practitioners. The sample group was homogenous because all informants hold a middle management position at the C10 level. The study focuses on the C10 level, whose desk title is Assistant General Manager, with a total population of N=60. Therefore, the total available population of C10 personnel was N= 60, while the actual sample size required was n=20, and the sampling method was purposive. According to Saunders (2012) and Creswell (2013), the valid number for a qualitative interview range from 5 to 30 people; having 20 key informants as the sample size is thus acceptable.

Data was collected from a sample of internal organization practitioners at the case organization, a Thai retail chain. These internal organization practitioners were middle managers as defined by the organization's job classifications. There were approximately 60 middle managers in the role at the time of data collection. A sample of 20 was selected purposely, based on their range of experiences, roles, and personal traits to ensure they were willing to participate. The data was collected through in-depth inquiries, using a variety of questions guided by the 5-D cycle of appreciative inquiry (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2015).

**Phase 2.** Appreciate-inquiry interview with organization development experts.

Data was collected from external organization development experts (n = 3). All three participants had advanced degrees and at least 15 years of experience in organization development, human resource development, and retail business development. Data were collected using in-depth interviews. The research instrument used in this study was the in-depth interview questions drawn from the concept of Appreciative Inquiry. Data was recorded using a recorder and notetaking. During each one-on-one interview, the researcher used an interview guideline containing the pre-prepared questions to ensure that each interviewee was asked the same open-ended questions throughout the interview process, leading to descriptive answers that provided a story about the phenomena being investigated.

Following Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection, data were transcribed and coded based on a pre-established thematic coding framework. The coding followed the process used in the thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This process involved open coding, categorization and verification of initial themes, confirmation through recoding, and development and analysis of the themes identified.

The final step of the research involved developing a draft framework for implementing next-level leadership role readiness. This step involved triangulation of data from Phase 1 and



Phase 2 and the literature review, which was aligned along with the 4-D framework (Stavros et al., 2015) and with the organization's goals for the program.

**Table 2**

*Appreciative-Inquiry Interview Questions for Experts*

<b>4D</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
D1 Discovery	When do you think of the readiness for leadership’s role for the middle manager role? What have been the most focus areas for this job role from the organization’s views or business? To you, which competency is the most urgent need for talent development for the middle manager level (C10) for retails business; namely, strategic implementation, people development, entrepreneurship, change management, time management, professional proficiency, dedication, and commitment, and innovation?
D2 Dream	What are the essential variables or factors you see that could be incorporated into the leadership’s role readiness assessment framework for the future of leadership roles readiness of the middle managers?
D3 Design	How can we implement the leadership-role-readiness assessment framework to ensure the company’s maximum benefit, ensuring we eventually select the right talent for a broader responsible role? How can we ensure that consistent understanding, knowledge, and application of the use of leadership-role-readiness assessment?
D4 Destiny	Regarding timelines and frequent use of the leadership-role-readiness assessment, how often do you think we should use this? Why?

**Results and Discussion**

**Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis revealed four themes: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. A Summary of the key findings is provided in Figure 2.

**Discovery.** The expert participants described the current state of leadership role readiness assessment. Briefly, the organization used the Hogan leadership assessment tools commercial assessments. Expert03 indicated that these assessments generally work relatively well. According to Expert01, the leadership-role-readiness assessment process was based on 3-year to 10-year strategic plans and operational requirements. It currently occurs from middle management to senior management. However, some problems were identified, including its inflexibility and non-responsiveness to competitive and environmental demands according to Expert01 and Expert03.

The second aspect of the Discovery theme was leaders identifying leadership competencies in the organization. The middle managers and experts identified a range of potential competencies, although many of these competencies were identified by only one participant (e.g., performance evaluation). Their general area of application grouped these competencies. The most commonly identified leadership competency groups were business

and managerial competencies; change management competencies; leadership skills; people and teams; personal competencies, traits, and skills; professional competency/knowledge; and strategic management. The competencies identified are relatively close to those identified in the literature, which included: strategic implementation (Dyer et al., 2020); people management (Alagaraja et al., 2015); entrepreneurship (Robles & Zárraga-Rodríguez, 2015); change management (McCalman et al., 2015); time management (Claessens et al., 2007); professional proficiency (Guskye, 2014); organizational commitment (Mullins, 2016); and innovation (Dai et al., 2011). However, some are collapsed. For example, entrepreneurship and innovation are included in the business and managerial competencies category, as only a few participants identified, rather than self-standing.

**Dream.** The *Dream* theme concerned the aspects of leadership role readiness that participants (both managers and experts) felt could be included in a framework for middle managers. The analysis identified several core competencies aligned with the domains identified during the Discovery stage. These desired competencies are geared for the middle management layer, which means that full competency is not yet required in some cases. For example, while business strategy knowledge is critical, strategic management (not yet the manager's main role) is not; this is consistent with a pipeline perspective on leadership development, which argues that leadership competencies develop over time, and not all competencies are expected at all points in the leader's career (Dai et al., 2011). These desired competencies formed the basis of the Design phase, which is discussed in the following section.

**Table 3***Summary of the Targeted Competency for Leadership Role Readiness Assessment*

<i>Competency Domain</i>	<b>Desired Competencies</b>
<i>Business and Managerial Competencies</i>	Managerial knowledge and competency Global mindset Entrepreneurship
<i>Change Management</i>	Adaptability
<i>Leadership</i>	Motivation Leadership skills Long-term vision Role model
<i>People and Teams</i>	People management Leading diverse teams with respect HR strategy Team support Performance evaluation
<i>Personal Competencies</i>	Self-leadership (self-goalsetting, self-motivation, self-development) Character and attitude Flexibility Communication Learning agility
<i>Professional Competencies</i>	Analytical competency Problem solving Digital and data competency Job-related skills Time management (planning) Continuous improvement Working under pressure Managerial ethics
<i>Strategic Management</i>	Business strategy knowledge Strategic management

**Design.** Having determined in the Discovery and Dream stage what the important leadership competencies are at the middle manager level, attention was turned to how these competencies should be assessed in the Design theme. Key issues included program structure, program tools, and promoting understanding and standard application of the program. More of the participants agreed on factors including clear objectives and strategic alignment. However, a wide range of implementation structure possibilities was suggested, not all of which were consistent.

Program structure was controversial, with many inconsistencies in how people thought the program should be structured. One of the most fundamental differences was expert disagreement on assessment approaches. At the same time, Expert01 felt that such a program should be integrated into performance evaluation and externally assessed. On the other hand, expert02 and Expert03 felt that self-assessment (of different degrees of formality) would be

acceptable. However, as none of the middle managers expressed an opinion, this remained controversial.

A variety of program tools were identified that could be used in such an assessment. The most popular tools included: monitoring and evaluation against key performance indicators (KPIs), 360° assessment, and technology-based tools. Additionally, participants were agreed that the tool should be standardized.

As for promoting understanding and consistent application of the program, the most important identified factors included communication about the assessment process, transparency and trustworthiness of the process, and a focus on the program's benefits. Implementation planning and knowledge were also identified as key. These factors were described as critical for ensuring that the self-assessment tool is applied consistently throughout the organization.

**Destiny.** The final theme of Destiny focused on how and why the program should be used. Key issues included the timeframe for use and the processes associated with them.

Almost all participants felt it was suitable to implement the leadership-role-readiness assessment process into the annual performance review, which is already part of its performance evaluation process. However, other schedules were also suggested. For example, one suggestion could serve as a formative post-recruitment tool for identifying competency development areas. In addition, alternative timings were suggested, including twice a year, quarterly or every two years, or on a variable schedule depending on goals. However, by far, annual integration into the performance evaluation was viewed as the most suitable place, which is consistent with research into leadership assessment, which routinely takes place in intermittent periods as part of a wider performance evaluation (Dai et al., 2011; Santoso et al., 2020).

Given the suggested timing, it is not a surprise that the most common suggestion for the associated process was the performance evaluation review. However, some experts and managers participants felt that the next-level leadership role readiness assessment could be used as part of the development planning and review process, which takes place alongside the performance evaluation process. The development planning and review process is a periodic process focusing on planning the individual's leadership development progress; this is to be integrated with the training process, which is the final process that was suggested as an opportunity for integration.

### **The Summary of Key Findings Based on the Results**

The key findings have incorporated insights from the thematic analysis of the AI approach. The objective of the framework is to associate the organization's competency needs for middle managers (Discover), what associated competencies should be measured at the middle management level (Dream), how these competencies should be measured (Design), and how frequently and when these competencies should be measured (Destiny).

The first part of the draft framework (the Discover and Dream stages) addresses what should be measured. In this part of the framework, specific company requirements for management and leadership competencies are associated with appropriate competencies to

measure at the middle management level in seven domains: Business, Change, Leadership, People and Teams, Personal, Professional, and Strategy. Some of these domains have fewer competencies at the measurement stage because they were mentioned relatively rarely, while others did not make it to the measurement stage. For example, Change Management was identified as a broad competency, but the only adaptability to change is needed at the middle management level.

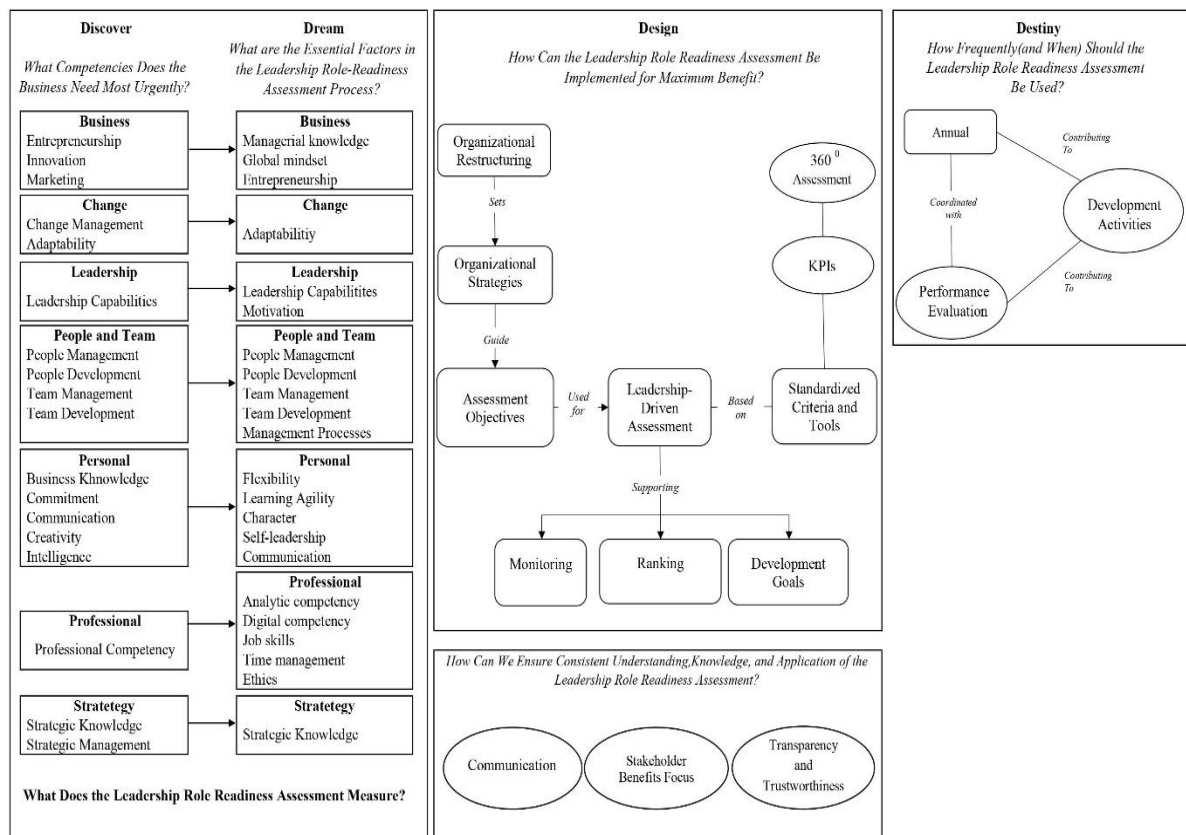
The second part of the draft framework (Design) addresses how the leadership role's readiness assessment process can be structured to meet the organization's needs and its members. The recommended process is a leadership-driven assessment process, with objectives based on the organization's strategies and standardized criteria and tools like KPIs and 360° assessment. The outcome should be used for leadership readiness ranking, performance monitoring, and setting and evaluating leadership development goals. In addition, to ensure consistent understanding, knowledge, and application of the assessment, communication about the program, stakeholders benefit focus, and a transparency-oriented process should be used.

Finally, the timing of assessment is addressed in the last portion of the framework (Destiny); this was the most consistent part of the study, and this is reflected in the clear recommendations: leadership role readiness assessment should be annual, coordinated with the performance evaluation process, and contributing to leadership development objectives.

Figure 3 presents the recommended framework developed from the thematic analysis, feedback, and the Appreciative-Inquiry Interviews.

**Figure 3**

*Summary of the Leadership-Driven Assessment Process (The Key Findings)*

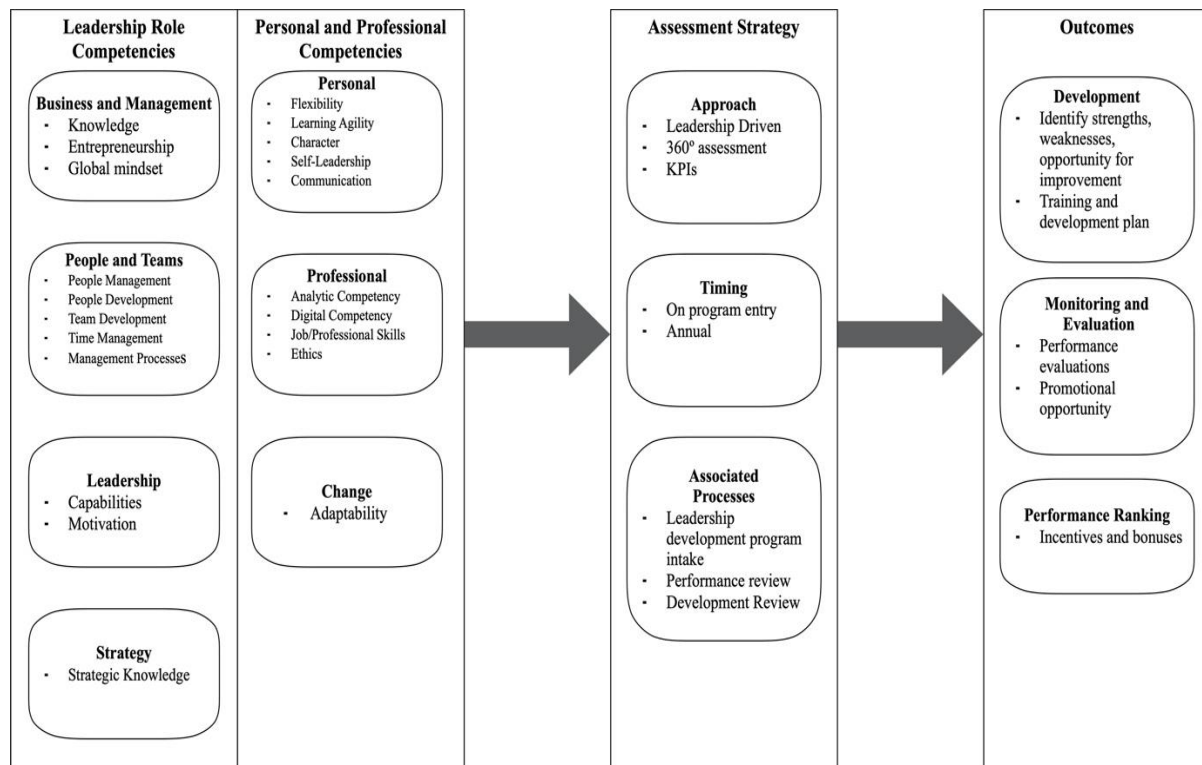


**The Draft Leadership Role Readiness Framework**

The final aspect of the research was the development of a draft leadership- role-readiness framework for the organization. This draft, shown in Figure 3, was developed from the findings above. The framework represents an approach to assessing leadership competency for next-level role readiness at the middle management level. The framework begins with a series of leadership and personal and professional roles specified at the middle management level. The leadership role competencies are specific to the leadership role (including business and management knowledge and attitudes, people and team competencies, leadership capabilities and motivation, and strategic knowledge). The personal and professional competencies include traits and general skills required or desired. The second part of the framework is the assessment strategy. It is recommended that a leadership-driven assessment approach should be used, relying on 360° assessment and KPIs to evaluate candidates. The assessment should be undertaken on entry to the leadership development program and afterward, associated with program intake, performance review, and development review processes. The outcomes include developmental outcomes to improve individual leadership competency and next-level role readiness, monitoring and evaluation of the performance evaluation process and identifying opportunities for promotion, and performance ranking for incentives and bonuses consideration.

**Figure 4**

*The Draft Next-Level Leadership Role Readiness Assessment Framework for Middle Management*



### Conclusion and Recommendations

This research addressed the organizational needs of one company, helping to develop a leadership competency assessment for next-level role readiness that can be implemented within the organization's existing processes. The research showed that leadership competencies are situational, and the competencies required in an organization may not align exactly with those identified in academic literature or other organizations. Thus, assessment of the organization's competency requirements, and perhaps most importantly, which of these competency requirements can be met at a certain level of the organization, are at the heart of developing an effective model. The use of AI also showed that the organization was already doing many of the right things, and the current process needed some redesign to meet future needs even though it was already good, illustrating the power of AI as an organizational improvement tool.

There are some limitations to this research, of which the most important is that the leadership-role-readiness assessment framework is designed for a specific organization and at a specific organizational level. While the implementation approach and timing of the assessment framework are likely to be usable in other contexts, the leadership competencies to be measured are likely to vary based on organizational position and type of organization. Thus, organizations should establish their own leadership competency needs when implementing any framework based on this research. However, this offers future research opportunities to develop a more general framework for leadership-role readiness competency. Such a model would

include a wider range of leadership competencies selected based on the leadership level to create an opportunity to develop a more generalized leadership competency assessment model.

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