Developing a Research Purpose & Question in Leadership Research

# Overview

Unit 3 focuses on the essential steps for developing a robust research question within the context of leadership studies. It is divided into three key topics: establishing a clear purpose in leadership research, connecting personal leadership goals to servant leadership principles, and formulating effective research questions. The unit emphasizes understanding the significance of leadership research, aligning personal and professional objectives with servant leadership, and employing strategies to create clear, relevant, and researchable questions. Through reflective activities, you will identify your research interests, brainstorm themes, and craft questions that will guide your inquiries and contribute to the leadership field.

## Topics

Unit 3 is divided into four topics. See the [**Unit 3 Topics**](https://learn.twu.ca/mod/book/view.php?id=1174788) link at the bottom of this page for the course notes on the following topics:

1. Establishing Purpose in Leadership Research
2. Connecting Your Leadership Goals and Purpose to Servant Leadership
3. Developing a Research Question
4. Unit Summary

## Unit Outcomes

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

1. Understand the purpose and significance of leadership research.
2. Identify a topic of interest in leadership studies.
3. Learn strategies to clarify your research purpose.
4. Develop strong, researchable questions that guide effective inquiry.

## Learning Activities

Here is a checklist of learning activities you will benefit from in completing this unit. You may find it useful for planning your work:

1. Watch “How to Use Your Interests to Inform Your Literature Review” about asking significant questions.
2. Read Chapter 2 in Introduction to Research in Leadership (Rosch et al, 2023).
3. Reflective Journal (optional)
4. Crafting a Draft Research Question

## Resources

Here are the resources you will need to complete the unit:

* Rosch, D. M., Kniffin, L. E., & Guthrie, K. L. (2023). *Introduction to research in leadership*. Information Age Publishing.

# Establishing Purpose in Leadership Research

It is important to establish a purpose in leadership research. LDRS 591, LDRS 697, and LDRS 698 are not just about completing an assignment to graduate from the Master of Arts (MA) in Leadership program. Instead, these courses are about developing scholarly inquiry skills to inform and strengthen your personal and professional leadership practices. According to Rosch et al. (2023), the purpose of research in leadership goes beyond answering questions—it aims to inform leadership practices, challenge assumptions, and inspire positive change within organizations and communities.

Leadership research is also an opportunity to live out the call to steward the gifts and knowledge God has given you. Scripture reminds that “whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Colossians 3:23, ESV). Research, then can be a way to seek wisdom and truth that glorifies God and serves others. Leaders are called to align their efforts with God’s purposes, fostering environments of justice, love, and service within their spheres of influence.

As you begin thinking about a research topic that interests you, it is important to be aware of your broad goals as a leader. On a personal level, consider how your research might reflect your calling and contribute to God’s work in the world. Additionally, it is important to align your academic and professional goals to get the most out of your research. Cherry et al. (2024) emphasize that research questions should align with both scholarly interests and practical applications, as this alignment ensures sustained motivation and relevance. For Christian leaders, this alignment extends to spiritual principles, ensuring that your research honors God, benefits others, and supports the pursuit of truth.

## 3.1.1 Learning Activity

📺 **Watch** “How to Use Your Interests to Inform Your Literature Review” by [Leigh A Hall](https://www.youtube.com/@LeighAHall) (2019) about asking significant questions.



Try using the following three statements to help you get clarity about what exactly you want to investigate.

If you can fill out these statements, then you likely have a narrow enough topic with enough direction to perform some great research.

1. I am researching \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (What: Topic),
2. because I want to find out \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (So What: Issue/Question),
3. in order to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Now What: Application/Purpose).

📖 **Read** Chapter 2 in *Introduction to Research in Leadership* (Rosch et al., 2023), “Beginning the Process of Research in Leadership.” Pay close attention to the “Tips for Finding Your Research Purpose” on page 34.

1. ✏️ **Reflect.** Then respond to the following questions in your Reflective Journal about how your research topic aligns with your broad goals as a leader: How can my research reflect my faith/religious beliefs and contribute to advancing God’s purposes in leadership?
   * Consider how your work could serve others, glorify God, and promote values like integrity, humility, and love in leadership practices.
2. What are the key values or principles I strive to uphold as a leader, and how might they shape my research interests?
   * Reflecting on your values can guide you toward topics that resonate with your personal leadership philosophy, such as ethical decision-making or fostering inclusive environments.
3. What challenges or opportunities have I encountered in leadership that I feel passionate about addressing or exploring further?
   * Personal experiences often reveal areas where more research or understanding is needed, potentially inspiring questions related to overcoming obstacles, supporting team dynamics, or adapting to organizational change.
4. How do I envision my research impacting others, both within my organization and in the larger leadership field?
   * How can my research honor the voices and experiences of marginalized or underrepresented communities, including Indigenous peoples?
   * Considering the potential impact can help you focus on issues with meaningful applications, whether they are directly practical (e.g., improving team performance) or more theoretical (e.g., understanding leadership behaviours).
5. Which leadership skills or qualities do I wish to develop further, and how might a research project support this growth?
   * Identifying areas for self-development, such as enhancing emotional intelligence or strengthening adaptive skills, can steer you toward topics that foster both professional and personal growth.
6. What are the broader social, cultural, or organizational trends in leadership that intrigue me, and how might I contribute to these conversations?
   * Identifying emerging trends, like diversity and inclusion or technological impacts on leadership, helps ensure your research is relevant to ongoing developments in the field.

These questions encourage reflection on how a research topic can serve your goals as a leader and contribute valuable insights to the broader leadership field.

Based on your reflection, consider the following steps to define your research purpose:

1. **Connect with Current Issues**: Cherry et al. (2024) recommend examining pressing issues within the field, such as equity in leadership or adaptive leadership in crisis situations.
2. **Reflect on Personal and Professional Goals**: Identify what motivates you in this research area—are you driven by a desire to promote ethical practices, develop inclusive cultures, or enhance organizational performance?
3. **Seek Feedback**: Discuss your ideas with peers, mentors, or practitioners to see if your topic resonates or to get suggestions for refining your purpose.
4. **Write Your Purpose**: The purpose of my research is to ….

# Connecting Your Leadership Goals and Purpose to Servant Leadership

The Master of Arts in Leadership program values the application of best practices to your personal and professional practice. MA Lead is founded in Greenleaf’s (1977) servant leadership which has ten characteristics:

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing
4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualization
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship
9. Commitment to the growth of people
10. Building community

Greenleaf’s (1977) servant leadership characteristics provide a foundational framework that supports skills and attributes necessary for effective leadership. The above characteristics were addressed throughout your course work, while developing your understanding of servant leadership.

For example, in Strategic Leadership, servant leadership emphasizes foresight and conceptualization, which are essential for effective strategic planning. Leaders who adopt this model prioritize long-term goals that benefit all stakeholders, not just the organization. This inclusive approach encourages decision-making that reflects both ethical considerations and community well-being.

In Team Leadership and Conflict Resolution, servant leadership’s focus on empathy, healing, and commitment to personal growth is vital. Servant leaders actively listen to their team members, promoting an environment of empathy that supports constructive conflict resolution. This approach builds stronger, more cohesive teams, where members feel understood and valued.

In Leadership Values and Ethics, servant leadership can serve as a model that places integrity, stewardship, and the greater good at the forefront of leadership decisions. It promotes a culture of ethical responsibility by prioritizing service over self-interest, ensuring leaders make decisions that positively impact all stakeholders.

One more example seen in the course is results-based leadership, which emphasizes measuring what matters. Servant leadership aligns well with this approach by valuing accountability and stewardship. Through a results-oriented lens, servant leadership drives goals that align with organizational values, measuring success not just by financial outcomes but also by positive impacts within the organization and on the community.

By integrating servant leadership across these subjects, leaders are encouraged to view their role as one of service, prioritizing ethical considerations, community impact, and individual personal growth. This approach ultimately aligns leadership practices with a deep commitment to serving others and advancing the common good.

In summary, the characteristics of servant leadership are at the core of MA Lead and enrich the understanding of what it means to lead effectively in a complex and dynamic environment.

Thinking about your personal, academic, and professional goals, which servant leadership characteristics are most relevant to your topic?

Try using the following three statements to help you get clarity about what you want to investigate.

If you can fill out these statements, then you likely have a narrow enough topic with enough direction to perform some great research.

1. I am researching \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (What: Topic),
2. because I want to find out \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (So What: Issue/question),
3. in order to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Now What: Application/Purpose).

# Developing a Research Question

Now that you have identified your research purpose and goals and connected them to servant leadership characteristics, you will have a research topic of interest. It is important to note that a topic of interest is a broad research idea, but you must still develop a clearly focused research question that you are interested in exploring.

Developing a research question is a critical step in the research process since it serves as a bridge between the broader purpose of the study and the specific inquiry that guides data collection and analysis. According to Rosch et al. (2023), researchers usually have a central research question that guides their work and is inherently more concrete than the overarching purpose they aim to address. While the purpose articulates the research’s general goals and intentions, a well-crafted research question provides clarity on the specific aspects of the topic that will be explored. A research question not only guides the research design but also help readers understand the investigation’s scope and the methods that will be employed to gather and analyze data.

Crafting effective research questions can be one of the most challenging aspects of conducting a research study (Rosch et al., 2023). It requires a deep understanding of the topic, critical thinking, and the ability to articulate specific inquiries that can be systematically investigated. Rosch et al. (2023) highlight that this process is iterative; researchers often refine their questions multiple times as they engage with the literature, gather preliminary data, or reflect on their evolving understanding of the topic. This iterative nature allows researchers to adjust their focus based on insights gained during the initial stages of their inquiry, leading to more robust and meaningful research outcomes. By approaching research question development as a dynamic and flexible process, researchers can enhance the relevance and impact of their studies, paving the way for insightful conclusions and contributions to their field.

As you begin drafting your research question, be sure it is:

* **Clear**: The question should be specific and straightforward.
* **Relevant**: Ensure that the question addresses a significant aspect of leadership.
* **Researchable**: The question should be feasible to investigate given the time and resource constraints.

## Developing Your Questions

1. **Start with “What,” “How,” or “Why:”** These words foster exploratory questions that allow for deeper understanding.
2. **Align with Your Purpose**: Cherry et al. (2024) highlight that research questions should flow naturally from the study’s purpose.

## Example Questions

* Why does empathy enhance team collaboration in Canadian emergency rooms?
* What impact do K-12 leaders’ commitment to the growth of people have on employee engagement?
* How does a business leaders’ foresight impact strategic planning in organizations facing change or crisis?

## 3.3.1 Activity: Crafting a Draft Research Question

Respond to the following in your Reflective Journal:

1. **Reflect on Your Purpose**
   * Begin by revisiting your research’s overarching purpose. Write a brief statement using two to three (2-3) sentences that encapsulates what you aim to achieve with your study. Consider aspects such as personal interests, professional goals, or gaps in existing literature related to leadership.
   * Example:
     + “The purpose of my research is to explore how people development can enhance employee engagement in remote work environments.”
2. **Brainstorm Key Themes**
   * Based on your purpose statement, brainstorm three to five (3-5) key themes or areas of interest. These themes will serve as the foundation for your research question.
3. **Draft Potential Research Questions**
   * Using your themes, formulate two to three (2-3) draft research questions. Make sure to start each question with “What,” “How,” or “Why.” As you draft, keep the following criteria in mind: clarity, relevance, and feasibility of research.
4. **Evaluate Your Questions**
   * Assess each of your draft questions against the following criteria:
     + **Clear:** Is the question specific and easy to understand?
     + **Relevant:** Does it address a significant aspect of leadership?
     + **Researchable:** Is it feasible to investigate given your time and resource constraints?
   * Revise any questions that do not meet these criteria.

# Unit Summary

This unit focused on developing effective research questions in leadership studies, primarily drawing from Rosch et al. (2023) and Cherry et al. (2024). It emphasized the importance of establishing a clear research purpose that aligns with personal and professional leadership goals and guides inquiry. You also reflected on your leadership values, experiences, and broader trends to identify relevant topics while connecting servant leadership characteristics to leadership practices.

The unit outlined a structured approach to crafting focused research questions, highlighting clarity, relevance, and feasibility of research. Through reflective activities, you articulated your research purpose, brainstormed themes, drafted questions, and evaluated them, ensuring you are well-prepared to explore meaningful leadership issues.

## References

Cherry, M. G., Boland, A., & Dickson, R. (2024). Doing a systematic review: A student’s guide (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness. Paulist Press.

Rosch, D. M., Kniffin, L. E., & Guthrie, K. L. (2023). Introduction to research in leadership. Information Age Publishing.