

# Common Sense Leadership: A Perspective of Artists and Musicians

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to continue the academic discussion about how common sense leadership is affected by different professional disciplines in the 21st century. The focus of this study was on individuals identifying themselves as either an artist, a musician or both. No specification was made as to the professional experience was sought during the study. Definition of both disciplines was left very abstract and at the discretion of the participant. This qualitative study was performed from December, 2013 through April, 2014 and involved 45 participants that identified themselves as either an artist or a musician. Participants concluded that common sense is directly correlated with three related factors: (a) the environment, (b) one's knowledge and (c) instinct. The participants indicated that common sense was nothing unique or special, but depended on one's own culture and how each individual environment would define the difference between right and wrong.

**JEL classification numbers:** M1

**Keywords:** Common Sense Leadership, Artists, Musicians

## 1 Introduction

On the surface, determining common sense in regards to leading a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization and applying common sense to the abstract approach found in the attitudes and unique creativity of artists and musicians is as much of a challenge as it is applying to business leaders. This paradox seems to completely diverge the beliefs of organizational leadership in contrast to the creative laden beliefs of artists and musicians.

It has been proposed that common sense provides a better way to train future leaders while encouraging the creativity found in artists and musicians. Previous research by Webber, Goussak and Ser (2012, 2013) and Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014)

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focused on the opinions of business leaders from the United States in a variety of public and private sector organizations and a more restricted view of business leaders from the People's Republic of China. The purpose of this study is to take a less formal/structured approach to understanding the correlation between the creativity of artists and musicians and more formally structured business leaders previously studied in regards to what is defined as a common sense leader. One analysis of the previously published work on common sense leadership was found by Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014) where Chinese business executives exhibited common sense behaviors that depended on fluidity primarily based on communication skills and that the environment/situation plays a direct role in the success of business leaders. In contrast, the correlation or lack thereof between U.S. business leaders who focus mostly on accomplishing tasks and implementing people to the appropriate tasks where Chinese leaders are more concerned about the team working in harmony within the environment towards accomplishing organizational success (Webber, Goussak, Ser & Yang, 2014).

Throughout all of the previous research, a standard definition of what common sense meant was not determined. The results of these studies determined that common sense was not necessarily defined but highlighted by descriptions of traits and behaviors. US business executives found that demonstrating common sense in daily business activities included three traits "(a) goal setting, (b) decision making and (c) employee motivation" (Webber, Goussak & Ser, 2013, p.2). US business executives further theorized that common sense focused not on a single behavior but a compilation of behaviors including the leader leading by example, how people were managed, proper leadership behavior and a comprehensive understanding of one's environment and placing the right individual into the appropriate position based on performance and experience in order to achieve maximum productivity (Webber, Goussak & Ser, 2013).

In contrast, the research conducted with Chinese business leaders was less static in regards of business attributes and more focused on the relationships between leaders and followers. "Chinese leaders found that common sense depended on the fluid nature of how leaders communicate the organizational vision throughout the organization. Chinese leaders also believed that the environment was critical to success" (Webber, Goussak, Ser & Yang, 2014, p. 11). The primary difference between the opinions of US business leaders in contrast to Chinese business leaders is that US business leaders focus mostly on accomplishing tasks and implementing people appropriately within those tasks where Chinese leaders are more concerned about the team being harmonious and organizational success happens when individuals succeed (Webber, Goussak, Ser & Yang, 2014).

The next logical step in this research is to expand the population studied to determine if opinion changes when a more specific group or groups of people are measured. This study was based on the opinions of U.S. artists and musicians of how they would define the concept of common sense and based on that definition what practical examples could be provided based on lived experiences as an artist or musician. These groups were chosen as the first group specific population because they possess a unique creativity and approach to the real-world. A total of 42 self-described artists and musicians participated in the current research.

The following summarizes the opinions and results of this research study, which shall serve as a starting point to engage the academic community in the discussion about common sense leadership. This paper presents a rational approach, beginning with a background on previous work followed by a thorough review of the literature. The

methodology and data are then presented with a comprehensive discussion of the findings and recommendations for future study.

## 2 Literature Review

There is a wide gap that exists between the meaning of common sense and the application of common sense to organizational activities (Webber, Goussak, Ser & Yang, 2014). Dinar (2011) found that researchers believe that any attempt to understand common sense dates back centuries which further complexes this study as we attempt to determine how common sense affects a diverse number of professions. In 1776, the American Revolutionist, Thomas Paine, wrote his seminal essays entitled *Common Sense* equating America's independence from the British Crown and that of American Revolutionists like Paine believe that practical assumptions are of "sound and good judgment" (Dinar, 2011, p. 696). Fletcher (1984) further believed that common sense consists of three primary components: (a) common sense unites individuals, (b) common sense shares opinions and (c) common sense shows a "way of thinking" (p. 204). The literature focuses on common sense as a way of life and how leaders lead which spans a variety of sources beginning with Salter and Highhouse's (2009) belief that common sense is based on individual situations.

The idea that situations dictate what encompasses common sense is supported by Saunders' (2008) research that artists and musicians focus their craft from a situational point-of-view. Based on the Hersey and Blanchard Situational Leadership Model (SLM), Irgens (1995) found that no single style of leadership was all encompassing. Appropriate leadership style depends on the situation and leadership is in a constant state of change. The SLM indicates that leadership style is based on one of four types: (a) telling, (b) selling, (c) participating and (d) delegating (Chen & Silverthorne, 2005). Each of the SLM types depends on the leaders' ability to focus on either tasks or relationships. This is not an all or nothing approach to leading because each of the types demonstrates features from both directions but may be more dominant in one more than another (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2007). According to Berman (2012), artists' attitudes continually change in both philosophy and behavior causing creativity to ever be in flux although change may take many years to occur.

It is important to have a clear understanding of each of the SLM types because understanding the dominant and less dominant features helps leadership to adapt to each unique situation. Schmerhorn, Hunt and Osborn (2004) believe that the premise of the SLM focuses on a correlation of one's ability to perform and how that performance is dominated by either task accomplishing or the establishing of relationships. For example, the telling style demonstrates the lowest amount of either feature. Followers, under telling, lack the skills or ability necessary to complete tasks or the desire to create relationships (Schmerhorn et. al.). Northouse (2007) believed that individuals rated within the selling type focus more on task completion for productive success but performance is individualized and not built through relationships. The participating type takes leadership up to the next level by beginning to exhibit the desire and ability to actually affect productivity through the integration of relationships both within the organization and with outside stakeholders. Finally, the delegating type is the most comprehensive of the four types because the leader accomplishes tasks by motivating

followers and thus creating strong relationships both within the organization and with outside stakeholders (Ilies, Judge & Wagner, 2006).

One of the advantages of the Situational Leadership Model is also one of its weaknesses. Ambiguity because leadership style is situation based can create uncertainty and uncertainty can create doubt (Newstrom & Davis, 2007; Northouse, 2007). In relation to artists and musicians, Berman found that change in art is constant because “art does not belong to an economic or social elite, but is a communal resource where boundaries between creators, participants and the public are permeable” (p. 147).

21<sup>st</sup> century organizations operate in a constant state of change (Fisher, 1999). This concept presents a number of challenges for organizational leaders, as they must consider the ramifications for both the organization and the employees of that organization. Chowdhury (2003) believed that one problem with the changing environment is the way one focuses on change. The common manner in which employees consider change is linear. Unfortunately, change is a nonlinear concept that requires flexibility and a focus that understands that dealing with change may not follow a standardized format (Chowdhury, 2003).

In order to guide an organization’s employees through the change process, leadership must first understand that resisting change is a normal component of the process. Chowdhury (2003) advocates a four-step process in guiding an organization’s employees through the change process inevitable for any organization. Before a leader can lead a group of employees through the change process, the leader must understand the necessity of the change and the characteristics that motivate the change in the first place. An important part of understanding the necessity of change for any organization is the affect of change on both the internal and external stakeholders (Chowdhury, 2003). This first step encompasses the pre-launch phase that encompasses the internal justification for change by the leader and how that change affects the direction and vision of the organization. According to Chowdhury (2003), this step begins with the organization’s motivation for making the change and the affect that change has on the individual employees. Key to assisting employees in understanding the reason for change is a self-evaluation of the leader’s own reasons for encouraging change in the first place.

The second step focuses on the leader guiding their employees in understanding the necessity for change. During this step in the process, the employees of the organization are educated about the organizational changes and the importance for making these changes. An important part of the education process is the understanding that resistance is a normal component of the change process (Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez, 2007). Chowdhury (2003) recognized that change resistance is not a function of employees being resistant. In contrast, change resistance is a function of imposing a new direction on employees that is foreign to their normal daily activities.

The third step in the change process is the delegating of responsibilities from the organization’s leaders to their employees. Chowdhury (2003) believed that leaders involved in the change process create a vision and direction, but understand that successful implementation of change requires the employee’s direct involvement. Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez (2007) equate this part of the process as participative. According to Banutu-Gomez and Banutu-Gomez, change resistance is less likely to occur if both leaders and employees participate equally in the creation and implementation of change.

Tying together the literature with the concept of common sense in regards to artist and musician beliefs is interesting because these beliefs leave an imprint on both

organizational behavior and the perception of outside stakeholders. Webber, Goussak and Ser (2012) determined, in their study of common sense of senior level business leaders throughout the United States, that common sense is based on three primary concepts: (a) goals are set towards the completion of tasks; (b) leaders make decisions that successfully accomplish these goals and (c) leaders establish the necessary relationships among organizational followers and outside stakeholders through motivation.

### 3 Methodology and Data

This qualitative study used SurveyMonkey.com to collect data on the perception of self-described artists and musicians about their definition of common sense and how common sense is practically demonstrated in their lives. This study took place between December, 2013 and April, 2014. Participants were recruited using various means including word-of-mouth contact via email with known individuals of the researchers and known individuals of those participants, college campus visits and social media (e.g. FaceBook). This study involved 45 participants that were identified as self-described artists and musicians. Figure 1 shows a demographic breakdown of participants based on self-identification (e.g. artist, musician or both). The participants were asked to respond to two questions: (a) based on your background as an artist or musician, how would you define the concept of common sense? (b) please provide examples of what you believe is common sense based on your lived experiences as an artist or musician.

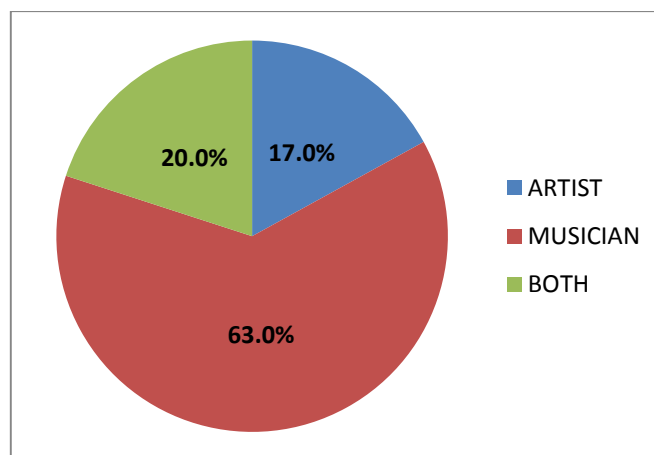


Figure 1: Demographic breakdown of participants

### 4 Findings

It was interesting to review the ways that artists and musicians defined the meaning of common sense. Very similar to the results found by Webber, Goussak and Ser (2012), in their study of senior-level business leaders, that a single broad category did not exist. Artists and Musicians do not gain common sense from book knowledge. Instead, the results of the study indicated that three prominent categories were evident amongst all of the opinions. The three prominent categories that musicians and artists found to define

common sense were: (a) the environment in which the individual exists, (b) the level of knowledge the artist or musician possessed in their particular field and (c) individual instinct. Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the opinions found by all study participants as the definition of common sense.

The foundation of the three categories determined to be common sense by study participants is Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow (1954), individuals are motivated to perform or serve based on the following five (5) needs: (a) physiological, (b) safety, (c) social, (d) esteem and (e) self-actualization. Artists and musicians prefer to create art or music based on passion, but in contrast common sense is more directly related to survival. Sometimes an artist or musician produces their *craft* (produces art or music) because it is popular and will sell satisfying the physiological and safety needs described by Maslow.

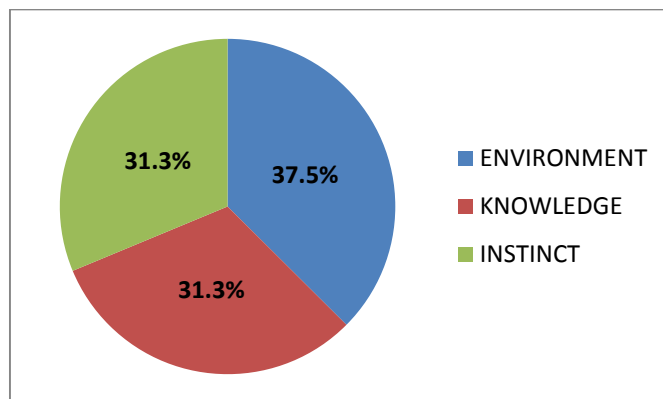


Figure 2: Breakdown of participants' definition of common sense

#### 4.1 Environment

Participant opinions correlating the meaning of common sense to the environment was clear and direct. It was the overwhelming opinion of the participants that common sense and the environment is believed to be what those in the environment believed is common and the norm. P9 said, "common sense is what is generally accepted by the majority as to what makes sense or is logical." Figure 3 provides a breakdown by participant self-identification of those identifying the Environment as the primary factor that influences common sense.

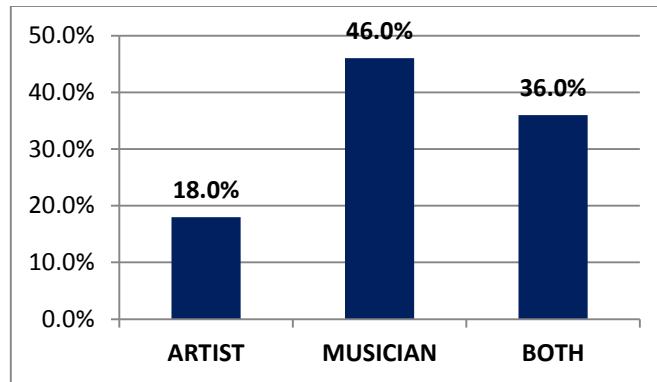


Figure 3: Breakdown by Participant Relating the Environment to Common Sense

## 4.2 Knowledge

Artists and musicians that identified knowledge as the primary factor that influences common sense based their opinion on basic evaluative abilities. Common sense is based on “balancing knowledge with logic” (P23). Although the environment may dictate what is popular, the artist or musician may create based on what the individual likes and at those times that is common sense. Experience, based on the present, is the key factor to dictating preference but which also becomes the focus of survival creating the concept known as *starving artist*. The foundation of the three categories determined to be common sense by study participants is Maslow’s (1954)

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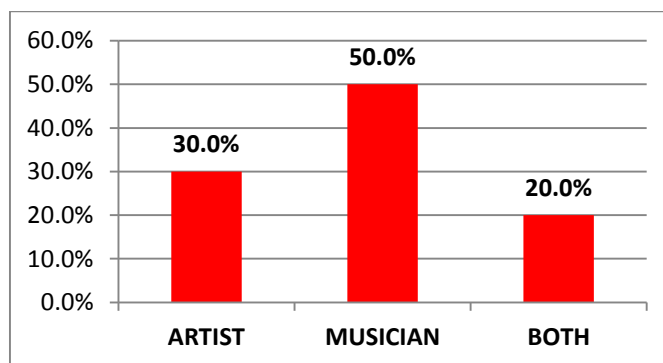


Figure 4: Breakdown by Participant Relating Knowledge to Common Sense

### 4.3 Instinct

Unlike the participant beliefs' regarding the Environment and Knowledge factors explaining the definition of common sense, Instincts was the third most popular factor. Participants that categorized instinct as the primary factor that influenced common sense focused on emotions and logic. P8 stated that common sense is the ability to reason effectively using [the] principles of logic. It involves making decisions in practical matters." Figure 5 provides a breakdown by participant self-identification of those participants that identified Instinct as the primary factor that influences common sense.

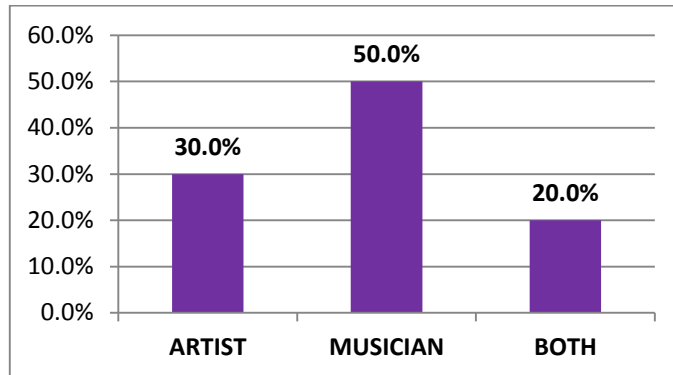


Figure 5: Breakdown by Participant Relating Instinct to Common Sense

## 5 Conclusions

Fletcher (1984) believed the foundation of common sense is the environment. There is not a single definition of what is common sense, but an accumulation of multiple components. The summary of this research study found that artists and musicians believed that common sense is a combination of the (a) environment, (b) one's knowledge and (c) one's instinct. P6 believed that "common sense is the norm that a majority of the population recognized as having validity." This refers to the environment in which one finds itself.

The second of the three factors that artists and musicians defined as common sense is knowledge. According to Andreeva and Kianto (2011), knowledge of one's discipline correlates with innovation and innovation is the basis for continued development. Artists and musicians believed that being knowledgeable in one's field is critical to using common sense that leads to self-development. P16 equated knowledge as a musician to "tuning [an instrument] before a performance." This study concluded that understanding what common sense begins with a thorough understanding of how basics operate in whatever one does. Artists must start with the knowledge of how the primary colors (red, blue and yellow) relate to one another leading to the creation of the secondary colors (red and blue creates purple). Artists know that a proper knowledge of the secondary colors and how they relate to one another creates tertiary colors that involves various shades of different colors used to create works of art.

The third and final factor that artists and musicians discussed was that of instinct. Participants believed that the relationship between instinct and common sense relates to the satisfaction of the most basic need following Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



theory. The foundation of common sense begins with one's ability to simply survive. P2 stated that "common sense is the emotional reasoning which one makes decisions." In conjunction with Maslow's hierarchy of needs to motivate how one behaves, artists and musicians believe that instinct guides how individuals make the most basic of choices starting with the difference between right and wrong.

## 5.1 Future Research

The researchers believe that the study of common sense is important to understanding the best way to operate both one's life and a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization. Studying specific disciplines and professions is the most logical step in understanding what guides these behaviors. Future research should continue studying specific disciplines like lawyers, doctors, and commercial airline pilots for example. Future studies should continue asking the general question about one's opinion of what defines common sense and what examples exist based on their discipline or profession. Eventually, a comparative analysis should be conducted to compare these results to determine if any commonalities or patterns exist or if different disciplines mean that different definitions exist.

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