KORN FERRY

REVEALING THE EARLY SIGNALS OF INFLUENCE

How Wharton Neuroscience, Korn Ferry, and Lazul.ai are uncovering the science behind tomorrow's leaders

Thought Leadership

Imagine a company that's not hiring just for today, but also for the future. One that's looking for young adults who could grow into transformative leaders over the next few decades. These organizations aren't just searching for technical know-how or academic achievements. They're asking a far more complex question: *What does leadership look like before it actually happens?*

To explore this question, Wharton Neuroscience, Korn Ferry, and Lazul Software Inc. (Lazul.ai) partnered to rethink how we assess and predict propensity to lead. By combining psychometrics, gamified neuroscience, and behavioral analysis, we've developed a new way to measure emerging leadership qualities in college students. And the early results suggest that a more multidimensional approach to identifying future leaders is within reach.

SPOTTING LEADERSHIP EARLY

Traditionally, organizations assess leadership through personality inventories, structured interviews, and performance history. These tools offer undeniable value. For example, Korn Ferry's industry-leading psychometric self-assessments evaluate traits (e.g., Presence, Striving), competencies (e.g., Manages Complexity, Directs Work), and drivers (e.g., Independence, Challenge)—all backed by years of research and proven to correlate with leadership success.

There is also considerable value in exploring new ways to augment psychometric self-report assessments that predict work performance. What if we could measure how someone reacts to uncertainty, switches strategies under pressure, or distributes their attention when facing complex challenges?

That's where science and technology open up new possibilities. Cognitive neuroscience has long studied these human behaviors. Now, with game-based digital platforms, we can begin to capture and quantify those insights, offering a novel lens for leadership science.

INTEGRATING PSYCHOMETRICS AND NEUROSCIENCE

Lazul.ai, a neuroscience-based talent assessment platform, designs game-based challenges to explore how people think and adapt, measuring constructs like memory, reaction time, behavior under cognitive stress, attention, risk management, and task prioritization.

In a joint study, Wharton Neuroscience and Korn Ferry partnered with Lazul to assess University of Pennsylvania students using Korn Ferry's trait assessments, alongside Lazul's neuroscience-based games. The participants were also evaluated for "leadership propensity," defined by whether they had taken on roles leading student organizations or campus activities. These roles serve as early indicators of a person's inclination to lead.

TRAITS AND THINKING STYLES MATTER

As expected, personality traits measured using Korn Ferry's Forced-Choice IRT techniques proved relevant. Students who scored higher on Presence and Agility (analogous to the two Big 5 personality factors, Extraversion and Openness to Experience) were more likely to have assumed leadership responsibilities. This aligns with longstanding research linking sociability and intellectual curiosity to emerging leadership. But leveraging Lazul's games revealed new insights. Two in particular showed predictive value beyond personality traits.

The first game assessed cognitive flexibility by requiring participants to switch repeatedly between tasks under timed conditions. Those who responded more quickly and flexibly were more likely to be leaders on campus. In contrast, those who took a slower, more cautious—but more accurate—approach showed lower leadership propensity. This reinforces what personality-based agility measures have previously shown: comfort with switching gears under pressure, even at the risk of making occasional mistakes, may reflect an underlying adaptability that is valuable in leadership contexts.

The second explored how students allocated effort across tasks with varying rewards. And the findings were striking: those who distributed their effort across multiple lower-reward tasks—rather than focus on a few high-reward ones—were more likely to show leadership propensity. This pattern may reflect how leaders often think—managing multiple priorities, staying engaged across activities, and maintaining situational awareness in complex environments.

These two offered a window into participants' real-time decision-making strategies. While conceptually similar to some Korn Ferry traits, Lazul's measures of cognitive flexibility and effort distribution gave us a new look into these constructs. This difference in assessment approach provides powerful insights that complement the Korn Ferry traits that matter for leadership.

A DEEPER LAYER OF LEADERSHIP

One of the study's most illuminating parts focused on risk propensity. Leadership often requires making decisions with limited information, balancing potential rewards with unknown consequences. Understanding how someone approaches risk—strategically, emotionally, and cognitively—can offer valuable clues about their leadership approach.

One Lazul game asked students to place bets based on their confidence in various outcomes. Those who placed larger, more varied bets showed a higher risk tolerance, as measured by a multidimensional assessment of risk-taking behavior across financial, operational, and interpersonal domains. Study results reinforced

the idea that our propensity for risk-taking is not determined by bold or assertive social leadership, but by how one manages uncertainty.

Still, personality traits played a key role. Students high in Agility—described as intellectually flexible, curious, and comfortable with change—showed higher risk propensity, confirming prior research indicating that openness to new experiences may prime individuals to handle uncertainty. By contrast, those high in Striving—linked to conscientiousness and a preference for order—showed a lower tolerance for risk. They, instead, may prefer structured environments and predictable outcomes—particularly when Agility and its related traits are low, making them more cautious in ambiguous or high-stakes situations.

Notably, while Presence is positively associated with leadership propensity, the trait did not incrementally affect risk tolerance in the company of other factors. This underscores a subtle but important point: being outgoing or persuasive does not necessarily mean someone is more comfortable taking risks. Leadership, especially at higher levels, often demands a blend of courage, judgment, and reflection that goes beyond the traits associated with charisma.

This research opens up opportunities to identify hidden leaders **who don't fit traditional molds**, enrich assessments **with real-time cognitive data**, and build sustainable leadership pipelines **that are broader and more diverse**.

TOWARD A MORE NUANCED MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

Together, our study's findings paint a richer, more layered picture of leadership propensity and risk tolerance. While traits like Presence and Agility are strong indicators, measures of how people think, adapt, and manage uncertainty can offer additional insight.

More importantly, these markers show up long before someone accumulates years of work experience. They can be measured in undergrads, interns, and early-career professionals, providing talent scouts and leadership development programs a fresh approach for identifying people with a propensity to lead.

For organizations, this opens up opportunities to identify hidden leaders who don't fit traditional molds, enrich assessments with real-time cognitive data, and build sustainable leadership pipelines that are broader and more diverse.

MAPPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

The collaboration between Wharton Neuroscience, Korn Ferry, and Lazul.ai offers a glimpse into the future of leadership science. Blending rigorous personality assessment with dynamic cognitive and behavioral data moves us closer to a more comprehensive, human-centered understanding of leadership emergence.

Our goal isn't to replace traditional methods, but to augment them with new research. Greater insight often comes from the intersection of disciplines like psychology, neuroscience, and emerging technologies.

By making the neuroscience-based dimensions of leadership actionable, this partnership could unlock the potential of the next generation of changemakers—starting not in the boardroom, but in the classroom.

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AUTHORS

Nick Angelides, PhD
Chief Scientist
Lazul Software, Inc.

Amelia Haynes
Manager, Research & Partnership Development
Korn Ferry Institute

Sarah Hezlett, PhD
VP, Assessment Science
Korn Ferry Institute

Elizabeth Johnson, PhD
Executive Director, Wharton Neuroscience Initiative
Senior Fellow, Wharton Neuroscience Initiative
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Jean-Marc Laouchez
President
Korn Ferry Institute

James Lewis
Senior Director and Senior Scientist
Korn Ferry Institute

Michael Platt, PhD
Faculty Director, Wharton Neuroscience Initiative
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Winston R. Sieck, PhD
Senior Data Scientist
Korn Ferry Institute

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