

Research Project

Five Foundations of Inner Leadership: First Results

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Why Does Inner Leadership Matter?

Leaders today face unprecedented levels of complexity, rapid change, and emotional demand. This takes its toll: stress and mental health challenges are rising, while the average lifespan of companies in leading indices keeps shrinking.

Hypothesis: Enjoyment, fulfillment, and effectiveness at work depend not only on what leaders *do*, but on the *state they are in when they lead*.

When leaders operate from a contracted mental state—driven by pressure, fear, or the need for approval—their impact diminishes, and their wellbeing suffers. We believe a new compass is needed.

The Five Foundations of Inner Leadership

Drawing on psychotherapy, cognitive and neuroscience, contemplative traditions and leadership research, Mirko Caspar developed a framework of Five Foundations that capture the inner states leaders can cultivate to thrive under pressure and complexity:

- **Open** | seeing inner and outer reality with curiosity and fresh perspective, not stuck in one's own view.
- **Grounded** | being calm, centered, and present, even in uncertainty.
- **Connected** | feeling close to others while remaining authentic.
- **Directed** | knowing where you are heading and how to get there.
- **Advancing** | moving forward with inner motivation, joy, and sustainable pace.

Together, the five foundations form a practical, research-informed framework for more resilient, effective, and fulfilling leadership.

Aim of the Research Project and Research Approach

Develop measurement scales for the Five Foundations of Inner Leadership to assess leaders' inner states and investigate the interrelationships among these foundations.

Research approach

- **Kick-off:** Ten student groups were introduced to the Five Foundations in a 2-day workshop to gain a conceptual and experiential grasp.
- **Interviews & literature review:** We explored how these inner states can be measured as felt experiences.
- **Scale development:** From 150–250 draft items per foundation, we refined the list to 7–10 validated items per dimension.
- **Impact measures:** Wellbeing, fulfillment, and effectiveness were measured using excerpts from established scales (e.g., PERMA Profiler, Satisfaction with Life).
- **Pressure patterns:** We also examined behaviors that emerge under stress—where leaders “cling” and how the foundations interact (e.g. “*Unter Druck gehe ich sofort ins Handeln*”, “*Unter Druck ziehe ich mich in mich selbst zurück und werde passiv*”).

First Results¹

- **Five robust factors:** Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the presence of five distinct foundations. Connectedness shows two facets but still holds as one overall construct.
- **Relevance:** The Five Foundations together explain around half of leaders' wellbeing and fulfillment, as well as self-assessed effectiveness (to be further validated with 360° measures).
- **Causal relationships and interdependencies:**
 - **Foundational role of Open and Grounded:** When facing a new dilemma, leaders first need to create calm presence (*Grounded*) to open up perspectives (*Open*) and then accept and integrate new realities. *Openness* and *groundedness* reinforce each other and act as the basis for further action.
 - **Impact on other dimensions:** From this open and grounded foundation, leaders are better able to *direct*, *connect*, and *advance*. Both openness and *groundedness* show significant positive impact on all three other foundations.
 - **Impact on outcomes (cf. Figure 1)**

Directedness, *connectedness*, and *advancing* positively influence wellbeing, fulfillment, and effectiveness.

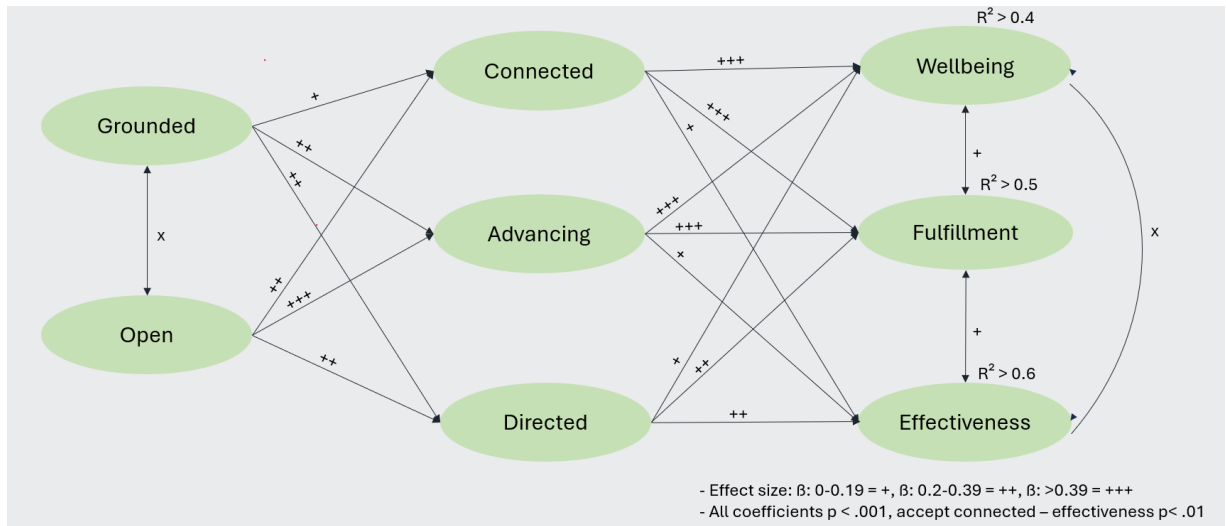
Connectedness has the strongest impact on wellbeing (aligned with the Harvard Study of Adult Development). This is also the strongest causal relationship of the model.

Advancing has the strongest effect on wellbeing and fulfillment, supporting approaches of “active coping.”

¹ Modeling by Helen Grobe (Chair of Value-Based Marketing | Marketing Center Münster | Universität Münster)

While with lower coefficients, *directedness* and *advancing* both show highly significant effects on effectiveness ($p < .001$) – as a more external variable it makes sense that it seems to be influenced by even more external factors, with connectedness also contributing positively, however on a lower significance level ($p < .01$).

Figure 1: Model results



- **Pressure patterns:** We also identified three underlying factors when looking at pressure pattern across the five foundations that we interpret as the response styles: *approach/assert*, *earn*, and *avoid*.

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Appendix | Sample Measurement Items (English Version)

Open

- I am open to new perspectives.
- I engage with new things.
- I approach new things with a curious attitude.

Grounded

- In my daily work life, I feel calm and balanced inside.
- I have a sense of calm and stability in my work life.
- I usually feel calm and present, even when things are difficult.

Connected

- I feel connected with other people at work.
- I have good connections with others and remain true to myself.
- I find it easy to build relationships with people in my work environment.

Directed

- I am always aware of my inner goals.
- I have a clear idea of what I want to achieve in the future.
- I know what I want to accomplish with my work.

Advancing

- When I do something at work, I usually feel an inner drive.
- I stay engaged with what I do, even when it is challenging.
- I experience joy in getting things done.