Practitioner's Corner
Leadership Emergence Theory in the Corporate Context

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Numerous leadership theories describe the characteristics, values, attitudes, and behaviors that are indicative of leadership. However, Avolio and Gardner (2005) asserted that the actual process by which individuals develop leadership has not been adequately studied. Lord and Hall (2005) contended that this may be because the theories have neglected to address the deeper aspects of character that develop over a lifetime. Leadership emergence theory (Clinton, 1988a) is a theory of leadership development that is based on the experience of Christian ministry leaders over a lifetime. Recent research (Stadler, 2008) has shown that leadership emergence theory is applicable to the development of leaders who work in the corporate environment. The findings from this research provide insight that can be used by practitioners to broaden corporate leadership development approaches, enhance executive coaching programs, revitalize mentoring initiatives, and improve succession planning strategies.

Leadership development practitioners are increasingly incorporating empirically-tested leadership theories into the design of their programs. Unfortunately, most research on leadership is based on theories that describe the outcome of the process rather than the leadership development process itself. Numerous leadership theories describe the characteristics, values, attitudes, and behaviors that are indicative of leadership. However, the actual process by which individuals develop has not been adequately studied. Avolio and Gardner (2005) confirmed, "We have found that over the last 100 years, most leadership theories have been originated without a focus on the essential core processes that result in the development of leadership that would be characterized by those models" (p. 317).

Leadership Development

A number of leadership researchers have recognized the importance of identifying how leaders develop, including Bennis (1992, 2007), Bennis and Thomas (2002, 2006), Conger and Riggio (2007), McCall (2004), and Ready and Conger (2003). A few researchers, such as Dotlich, Noel, and Walker (2004) and McCall and Hollenbeck (2007), have identified the importance of certain key experiences in the process of leadership development. Despite these

efforts, Bennis (2007) has concluded, "Leaders develop by a process we do not fully understand" (p. 5). Similarly, Avolio (2007) has reported that "relatively little effort has been devoted to systematically explaining how such leaders and leadership develop" (p. 30). As a result, leadership development practitioners are left with little empirical guidance.

Lord and Hall (2005) contended that the lack of research on how leaders actually develop is due to the fact that most leadership development approaches have addressed "surface structure skills" as opposed to "the deeper, principled aspects of leadership that may be especially important for understanding the long-term development of effective leaders" (p. 592). Their conclusion pointed to the need for research that includes the development of those "deeper, principled aspects of leadership" over a lifetime. Recent research (Stadler, 2008) tested whether a theory of leadership development called leadership emergence theory (Clinton, 1988a), which was derived from studies of the lives of effective Christian ministers, could be applicable for leaders with a similar spiritual perspective who work in the corporate environment. A summary of the research follows, along with suggestions for how the findings can be applied by practitioners to more effectively design leadership programs and improve approaches to executive coaching, mentoring, and succession planning.

Leadership Emergence Theory

Leadership emergence theory (LET) is a descriptive theory of how Christian leaders develop over a lifetime. It was articulated by Dr. J. Robert Clinton (1988a) in a study which analyzed the lives of 420 historical and contemporary Christian leaders and missionaries. Clinton pointed out that his research had two goals. The first goal was to "determine a method for organizing and categorizing qualitative life-history data so that it could form an ongoing useful database for analysis" (p. 19). Clinton's second goal was to "integrate the findings so as to form the basis for a theory of Christian leadership development" (p. 19).

Clinton used grounded theory methodology to collect and compare the life histories of midcareer Christian leaders from numerous countries, cultures, and eras. The resulting theory states that "the development of a leader can be significantly described by using three major variables labeled *processing*, *time*, and *leader response* [italics added]" (Clinton, 1988a, p. vi). Over the last two decades, over 3,000 case studies have been conducted to refine leadership emergence theory (Clinton, 2005).

Leadership development is defined within leadership emergence theory as "a measure of a leader's changing capacity to influence, in terms of various factors, over time" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 245). Clinton (1989) has identified three parallel processes within the leadership development process which are (a) internal psychological processes, (b) external sociological and contextual processes, and (c) divine processes. Combined, these processes are theorized to bring about the development in an individual's capacity to influence. It is the acknowledgement of the divine processes that differentiates leadership emergence theory from other theories of leadership development.

In addition to the three processes outlined above, Clinton (1988b) has identified six phases of leadership development which extend across a lifelong timeline. The six phases are (a) sovereign foundations, (b) inner life growth, (c) ministry maturing, (d) life maturing, (e) convergence, and (f) afterglow or celebration. The names of the phases reflect the ministerial context, but the experiences identified within them may be similar to experiences encountered within the corporate context.

Phase 1 – sovereign foundations. In the first phase, God works providentially through the family, events, and environment of childhood and young adulthood to begin shaping a potential leader. When viewed retrospectively, the positive and negative experiences of this timeframe can be seen as providentially-designed learning opportunities. The major lesson for leaders to learn in this phase is to respond positively to both the positive and negative circumstances that God uses to develop character. It is often hard for relatively-young leaders to look back and view the negative experiences from their childhood and early adulthood as potentially positive, but their value will be more readily seen retrospectively. Clinton (1988b) noted, "It is often difficult to see the importance of all these items until later phases" (p. 44).

Phase II – inner life growth. In the second phase, the potential leader's character is the focus of development. As the leader begins to undertake leadership tasks, inner life lessons occur. Situations occur that develop character and prepare the individual for the next steps of leadership. As Clinton (1988b) pointed out, a positive response "allows a leader to learn the fundamental lessons God wants to teach. If the person doesn't learn, he will usually be tested again in the same areas. A proper response will result in an expanding ministry and greater responsibility" (p. 45).

Phase III – ministry maturing. In the third phase, the emerging leader begins to exercise individual strengths and gifts. The leader may seek training to increase his or her effectiveness. A second focus of this phase is relationships. Through interactions with others, the leader begins to learn lessons that provide insight into areas for personal development (Clinton, 1988b).

Phase IV – life maturing. In the fourth phase, the leader has gained clarity about how to use his or her unique gifts and strengths and is doing so in a way that is satisfying and fruitful. "He gains a sense of priorities concerning the best use of his gifts and understands that learning what not to do is as important as learning what to do" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 46).

Phase V – convergence. In the fifth phase, the leader is moved into a role that maximizes the leader's gifts, and the leader is freed from responsibilities that are not well suited. This peak period of leadership effectiveness is not always reached. Clinton (1988b) noted, "Sometimes they [leaders] are hindered by their own lack of personal development. At other times, an organization may hinder a leader by keeping him in a limiting position" (p. 46).

Phase VI – afterglow or celebration. In the sixth phase, the leader enjoys "an era of recognition and indirect influence at broad levels" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 47) based on influence developed through a lifetime of contacts and relationships.

Within each phase, many descriptive *processing items* occur. Processing items are "the providential events, people, circumstances, special interventions, inner-life lessons, and/or anything else that God uses" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 253) in developing a leader. *Process incidents* are the actual occurrences of process items in an individual leader's life. Since every life contains innumerable process incidents*, critical incidents* are those which are "important enough to be remembered and somehow had significantly been used in shaping the leader" (Clinton, 1989, p. 79). Process incidents are categorized into groups of process items with similar functions and properties. Over 50 process items have been identified and labeled by Clinton. Some process

items occur in multiple phases. Others tend to occur within certain phases. Clinton's research on contemporary leaders reveals an average of 34 process items in a typical study of a leader's life.

Knowledge of the typical experiences in each phase can provide a calming view of current struggles a leader is facing and can help him or her prepare to respond positively to future challenges that are likely to occur. Transitions between the phases can be difficult and are characterized by *boundary events*, which are defined as experiences such as "crises, promotions, a new ministry, learning a major new concept, unusual experiences, life-changing encounters with a person, a divine guidance experience, or a geographic move" (Clinton, 1988b, p. 49). A change in a leader's "sphere of influence, either increase or decrease in numbers, or a change in the kind of sphere of influence usually signals a change in developmental phases" (p. 52). The value of delineating the six phases of leadership development comes from providing insight for leaders into how their current leadership challenges fit into a lifetime view of the leadership development phases, which can help leaders anticipate potential upcoming developmental situations. Leadership emergence theory is a necessarily extensive theory since it addresses a lifetime scope. See Clinton (1988a, 1988b, 1989, and 2005) for a more detailed explanation of the theory.

Unlike other theories of leadership development, leadership emergence theory is based on the concept that God's providential development plan for the leader actively guides his or her development as opposed to chance. Leadership emergence theory evokes wisdom from God's eternal perspective to inform the view of current leadership experiences and to encourage a positive response from the leader as part of the leader's spiritual development. Practical benefit occurs when a leader shifts his or her awareness to realize that these developmental life experiences are being orchestrated by God for the purpose of his or her development as a leader.

Testing the Theory in the Corporate Context

Recent research (Stadler, 2008) explored whether the underlying tenets and assumptions of leadership emergence theory apply to Christian leaders who work in a secular corporate context rather than in a ministry context. It examined how Christian leaders in secular corporations view their development as leaders and therefore how leadership emergence theory might be used to develop leaders more effectively. The following four questions guided the research:

1. Have Christian leaders in corporate contexts been shaped by the types of processing items identified in leadership emergence theory?
2. Are they aware of the importance of their response to these shaping experiences?
3. Have they changed their views of past events as the passage of time has enabled clearer insight?
4. Could exposure to the concepts of leadership emergence theory open them to deeper development as a leader?

The multiple-case qualitative study (Stadler, 2008) involved sequential interviews with five leaders, identified through purposeful sampling, who held positions within three levels of the CEO in large corporations. The leaders shared a Christian worldview, ranged in age from 51-69, had between 27 and 45 years of work experience, and had worked in organizations ranging from $1-$42B in annual revenue. Demographically, all of the leaders were Caucasian and one was female. All of them had additional experience as leaders in other contexts, such as the non-profit sector, higher education, the military, or as entrepreneurs, which enriched their

comparative view of the corporate context. The unstructured nature of the interviews allowed flexibility to delve into both the organizational context and the worldview of the leaders as it had bearing on their perception of how they developed as leaders. Cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2003) was employed to determine the applicability of the theory as gauged by a positive or negative evaluation of the responses in light of the research questions.

The findings showed that the corporate context does not appear to be a barrier to the application of the theory. The findings also confirmed the importance of a leader's perception of God's involvement in leadership development. The cross-case analysis of the interviews identified two different patterns of findings for the research questions: (a) a pattern of affirmative findings for all the research questions and (b) a pattern of an affirmative finding for the first question followed by lack of affirmative findings for the remaining three questions. The second pattern of findings confirms the tenet of leadership emergence theory that a leader's lack of awareness of personal responsibility to respond positively to processing items (research question two) can inhibit a leader's development, which could preclude the ability to discern the revised meaning of processing items upon reflection over time (research question three) and thereby lessen the perceived value of reviewing previous leadership experiences in order to deepen development (research question four). The study also illuminated the importance of the internal context of a leader's mindset to recognize the providential aspects of leadership development. One of the underpinnings of leadership emergence theory is God's active, caring involvement in every aspect of a believer's life, including his or her development as a leader. Lack of attentiveness to this orchestrated guidance appeared to hamper awareness of the relationship between events and therefore reduced the developmental potential of the response of the leader to those events (Stadler, 2008).

Within the last few years, the spiritual dimension of organizational life has been explored more formally through research. Duchon and Plowman (2005) demonstrated that work unit performance is positively associated with work unit spirituality, and Reave (2005) has shown that there is consistency between effective leadership and spiritual practices. Dent, Higgins, and Wharff (2005) reviewed 85 scholarly articles and found that most of them hypothesized a correlation between productivity and spirituality. They have pointed out the need for "a comprehensive and integrated theory of leadership that acknowledges leaders as complex beings who mature and develop over time in relationship to spiritual, emotional, cognitive, social, and physical domains" (Dent et al., p. 648).

Application for Practitioners

The research outlined here (Stadler, 2008) confirmed that leadership emergence theory can apply in the corporate context to the degree that an individual leader holds a mindset, an internal context, which includes acknowledgement of God's active involvement in the development of leaders. The value of leadership emergence theory may not be as apparent to a leader who does not currently have an internal context that is consistent with the presumption that the providence of God extends to the development of leaders. However, even if an individual leader subscribes to a different worldview, many leaders embrace the philosophy that "everything happens for a reason" so they may also benefit from the lifetime perspective of the theory. Applying the theory may have practical value for any leader who is interested in (a) reflecting on life's cumulative patterns, (b) recognizing the phases of development, (c) understanding the benefit of challenging transition periods, and (d) choosing responses to

situations that will advance rather than derail his or her leadership journey. The findings of the research reviewed here can be applied by practitioners in multiple ways to improve the design of leadership programs as well as approaches to executive coaching, mentoring, and succession planning. Suggestions for application follow.

Leadership development programs. Leadership emergence theory highlights the importance of designing programs that (a) illuminate events typical of different phases of development, (b) that offer practical wisdom for navigating challenging leadership situations, (c) that provide insight into potential future challenges, and (d) that instill hope from the assurance that what is being experienced is normal and valuable. Customizing programs for leaders in different phases of development allows for more targeted activities rather than presuming that leaders at a similar organizational level or age need the same type of leadership development support.

Executive coaching. Leadership emergence theory can provide new insight into how to coach leaders in different phases most effectively. It can reveal ways to sensitize leaders to anticipate and prepare for future experiences. As Clinton (1989) stated, "Being forewarned of certain kinds of processing that will occur during certain periods of time can enable a smoother transition and learning of lessons" (p. 292). It can also clarify how to help leaders avoid derailment by providing them the opportunity to reflect on the impact of their choices.

Mentoring. Leadership emergence theory can position mentoring in a new light as a leadership development strategy. Providing information to both mentors and mentees on the concepts of leadership emergence theory can increase the intentionality of discussions between senior and junior leaders in order to enrich the content of the wisdom shared. It can create the opportunity for senior leaders to contribute in new ways to an organization's leadership development strategy by providing a method for them to harvest their years of experience and a framework through which to instructionally articulate the value of particular experiences.

Succession planning. Leadership emergence theory can guide succession planning strategies to ensure that the next role identified for a leader will be in line with his or her next developmental phase and individual strengths. It can be used to steer high-potential leaders to roles that will maximize their development and avoid unfruitful assignments that could actually hinder or slow their development. It can provide a framework for leadership development discussions with senior leaders at the highest levels of the organization. The theory provides senior leaders, who often see themselves as no longer needing development, with a perspective from which to embrace continued development as a way to define and achieve a meaningful legacy.

Conclusion

Bennis (2004) has claimed, "Until we know more about how leadership truly develops, leadership education programs may be mostly acts of faith, evidence of our belief that authentic leadership is possible" (p. 36). As practitioners increasingly seek to apply research-based knowledge to the development of their leadership programs, leadership emergence theory holds promise for revolutionizing the way the mission of developing leaders is approached and

achieved. After two decades of successful application in the ministry environment, leadership emergence theory provides a framework that has now been demonstrated to apply in the corporate environment for leaders who believe that God cares about every aspect of their life, including their development as leaders. Even if a leader subscribes to a different world view, leadership emergence theory may help a leader take a lifetime view of past developmental events and be better prepared to maximize the learning from future events. The insight provided by leadership emergence theory can be used by practitioners to broaden corporate leadership development approaches, enhance executive coaching programs, revitalize mentoring initiatives, and improve succession planning strategies.

About the Author

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