



Practitioner's Corner

Redefining Leader Development: Organizational Learning that Encourages a Culture of Transformation

Kirk G. Mensch
Myra E. Dingman
Regent University

Organizational executives are becoming keenly aware of the importance of encouraging self-directed leader development and lifelong learning. It is also evident that a great deal of confusion abounds regarding what is meant by the practice of leader development. This paper explores the nature and source of this confusion and provides clarification regarding terminology and shifting paradigms in methodology and organizational culture. Furthermore, we propose a focus on personal transformation, moral development, and sustainable behavioral change as critical aspects of leader development.

In order to understand what is meant by leader development, it is best to begin by understanding what it is not. Leader development is not synonymous with such things as management training, and it is surely more than training in general. It is not the management of training programs, even if it is called a development program, and regardless of the number of times the term *leader* or *leadership* appears in the course description. Leader development is neither a single class nor a series of classes in leadership theory or leadership in practice. Leader development is also not a speaker series where prominent academics or experienced practitioners attempt to impart knowledge to their listeners. It is also not any particular item, characteristic, or aspect of a program; rather, leader development is a process of personal transformation; and without a purposeful and personal transformation, there is no development as a leader. And, while many of the examples mentioned previously may be designed to encourage personal transformation, they must not be considered in and of themselves developmental but instead be considered as a means to a greater end.

The challenges that organizations will face over the next 10 years are unknown, but we do know that these years will be filled with scenarios not yet seen today, complex situations that some researchers commonly refer to as *wicked problems* (a problem that is described as difficult, if not impossible, to solve with current understandings), and the need for new answers, new

solutions and capabilities, and a new era of organizations filled with both executives and employees who exhibit leadership behaviors—not just managers.

There is a big difference between leaders and managers. While organizational executives (ranking decision makers for a group of employees working to achieve a common goal) want to develop competent and effective leaders, those who exhibit leadership traits and skills, they often believe that calling a manager a leader is appropriate. These executives recognize the need for real and authentic leadership but are usually unaware of how to facilitate their employees' leader development. A special report on the need for stronger leaders in the Federal sector was published by *BusinessWeek* in February, 2010, which recognized that "Although there are certainly many strong leaders in both the Senior Executive Service, the government's top tier of career executives, and the broader civil service, there is general agreement among senior leaders in the government and experts who have studied the issue that more attention needs to be placed on the selection, assessment, and development of leaders." To understand how we might develop leaders, we first need to understand what is meant by *leadership*.

What is Leadership?

Leadership is the art of influencing an individual or a group of people to reach a common goal. The practice of leadership involves the skills and behaviors that are recognized as leading to the achievement of a common goal. This contradicts the common notion that leadership is achieved through rank, position, tenure, or title. Excellence in leadership should always be viewed as a goal that can never be totally perfected since, even if it were possible to control every changing aspect of the leader, it is not possible to control the changing aspects of the followers and the environment. Changes in relevant factors such as the follower, the society, the culture, and the environment require change in one's practice of leadership.

In Western society, it has become the norm to refer to employees in positions of authority and decision makers as "leaders." This is a misnomer and is misleading a new generation about what it means to exhibit effective leadership traits, skills, qualities, and abilities. These decision makers are "executives"—a term that we do not use lightly. Executives are managers who have often risen through the ranks to take on more responsibilities, more decision making power, and the authority to implement the mission, objectives, and goals of the organization. Executives can also be leaders, but the key is that all executives ARE NOT LEADERS. This article sets the stage to help us differentiate between someone who exhibits well-defined leadership skills and traits and someone who is a high-ranking manager—what we will continue to refer to as an executive. Raelin (2005) labeled this clarification of leadership as being *leaderful* and defined it as the following:

Leaderful practice constitutes a direct challenge to the conventional view of leadership as "being out in front"... everyone will need to share the experience of serving as a leader, not sequentially, but concurrently and collectively. ... Each member of the organization will be encouraged to make a unique contribution to its growth, both independently and interdependently with others. (p. 18)

Raelin's definition of leaderfulness confirms our stark contrast with the current understanding of who a leader *is* and the culture found in corporate offices. Leadership is not positional; it is not earned through dedication, hard work, and loyalty to a company; and it is not a reward for perseverance. Leadership is an action—something that we can experience. When we see it, we see it in a person, not in a title. At a time when company executives are learning to do more with

less by reducing hierarchical inefficiency as a necessary byproduct of economic competition, they must learn to inspire true leadership behaviors, at all levels of the organization, as the answer to the current leadership crisis.

Developing leaders and nurturing a culture of leadership behaviors assumes the following:

1. Everyone needs to share the experience of serving as a leader, not sequentially, but concurrently and collectively.
2. Anyone in any role/position can be developed to become a more effective leader.
3. Leader development should occur at multiple levels in an ongoing, dynamic fashion across the lifespan of each employee.
4. A lifelong learning attitude must be nurtured and encouraged by leadership. (Realin, 2005; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009)

The Power of Leadership

Good leadership provides an empirically verifiable competitive advantage, particularly in a service oriented sector such as the U.S. Federal Government, and is directly related to common missions such as recruiting and retaining top talent. Since leadership capabilities are viewed as a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Petrick & Quinn, 2001), many organizations invest heavily in leadership development (Day, 2001). Even with expenditures down in 2008 and 2009, organizations are still investing around \$1,075 per learner (down 11% from 2007) and \$56.2 billion on annual training (which includes a smaller percentage of expenditures directly related to leader development programs), as well as 17.2 hours per learner per year (“Gauges and Drivers: 2008 Industry Report”). Yet, as important as developing people is, the 2008 IBM Global CEO Study, “The Enterprise of the Future,” reported that 75% of company CEOs say building leadership capability is one of the top workforce challenges (IBM, 2008).

Leadership development is often erroneously defined as “expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes” (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Moxley, 1998). As noted earlier, leadership is not about a role or a process. For the purposes of this paper, the term “leader development” (versus “leadership development”) is the key term being discussed as it denotes the individual aspect of this type of development program and the primary focus of exploration. Organizational members, referred to as talent, are the critical resource for an organization’s competitive advantage. An organization’s leadership development program, therefore, is the foundation of recruiting, developing, and retaining the needed talent (Miller & Desmarais, 2007) to grow in the current economic challenges of the early 21st century and meet the succession needs of the retiring Boomer generation.

The Challenge of Development

In order to compete in an environment where rapid transformation is the norm, most organizations are keenly aware of the need for good leader development programs and the impact poor leadership has on their organizational missions of recruiting and retaining the top talent; yet those same organizations often struggle with creating, implementing, and sustaining successful programs (Griffin, 2003).

In the past, organizational leaders have attempted to develop their talent. In the 1990s, approximately 10-20% of leadership preparation was met through education such as MBA

programs and training (Fulmer & Vicere, 1996). Therefore, 80-90% of leader development came through other mediums; “training or education alone cannot develop a leader, nor can assignments without adequate coaching and career paths, nor can experiences that are unrelated to corporate strategic objectives” (Fulmer & Vicere, p. 36). This classroom training and development only resulted in about a 15% behavioral change in participants of these programs (Cromwell & Kolb, 2004). By the end of the 20th century, new methodologies began to emerge where individual transformation was realized, and organizational talent was hungry to learn both *hard* (technical and job-specific) and *soft* (intra- and inter-personal) skills.

Not only are the techniques significant, but the content of a leader development program must include a challenge to the current understanding of the philosophical values and beliefs of the participants in relation to the espoused values of the organization. Because the paradigm of leadership necessarily involves the follower, there are no amoral decisions within the paradigm of leadership. Emerging leaders must therefore understand what it is they believe, or think they believe, in a new light. They must understand the moral principles they wish to live by and then apply them contextually. And while this may seem trite, there are many who have never truly reflected on what it is they actually believe and value, and why. A successful leader development program’s content must reach beyond *professional ethics* and “the rule of law” and include moral development through an encounter with the very personal moral dilemma, and the program should embrace, not avoid, the demonstrated lack of personal responsibility and accountability that have led to moral failures rampant in our society.

Organizations must place the responsibility of moral understanding and acting rightly back on the individual; otherwise, the moral dilemma is not addressed, and the organization reduces its influence on the dilemma to the lowest common denominator, the rule of law. History shows that this is not good for the organization in the long run. How often have we heard statements such as “I did not technically break the law” in the aftermath of corporate chaos?

These complexities require a respect for the challenges that organizational executives face in determining how and why to develop their talent. New strategies need to be continually explored and formulated as new research in the area of personal transformation emerges, and organizations should continue to aspire to search for a holistic and integrated approach to encourage a very challenging and very personal transformation.

The Shifting Paradigm

Organizations have begun to realize that the type of traditional, lecture-based, classroom training found in most formal leadership development programs is ineffective at preparing leaders for 21st century problems (Dotlich & Noel, 1998). Organizational executives continue to look for alternative programs to support their leadership development needs (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999). Further, new skills, abilities, and competencies are needed from managers and leaders in this new era filled with increased complexity, need for collaboration, security concerns, and an increasingly diverse workforce (generations, races, cultures, traditions, leadership styles, etc.).

According to a Kellogg Study of 55 global leader development programs (Kellogg Foundation, 2002), there has been a shift in development to new training and personal transformation technologies, such as experiential and action learning, coaching, increased mentorship relationships, and holistic approaches outside of traditional classrooms. Integrative learning models have begun to appear in private companies and are expanding to the public

sector (see Raudenbush & Marquardt's 2008 report for the USDA, and Day, Harrison, & Halpin's 2009 book based on work with the U.S. Army). The purpose of an innovative and sustainable program (both for the organization and individuals) is to take current rigorous research in best practices, competencies, methodologies, and processes and combine them into an integrative model of leader development while customizing the model to the organization's environment and culture and to individual needs.

Rethinking How to Develop Leaders

In ancient Greece, the Oracle at Delphi is said to have announced Socrates as the smartest man alive. Plato tells us in his dialogues that Socrates believed this to be true only near the end of his life and that he believed it to be true only due to his understanding of how little he actually knew. Leader development, and perhaps wisdom in general, can be created more efficiently from an understanding of our limitations related to knowledge and experience and its applicability to the current state of affairs. Unfortunately, the humility demonstrated by Socrates is often lacking in those who have many years of experience, regardless of their recognized aptitude to make sense of that experience. This kind of humility, or lack thereof, affects executives' attempts at developing and creating the leadership culture to which they often aspire.

Despite the importance of leader development, organizations struggle with *how* to develop and implement successful programs. For example, programs may lack suitable methods for identifying a manager's strengths and weaknesses and lack knowledge of appropriate interventions to develop opportunities for growth. Many organizations are even unsure of who should be developed. Those in upper management often have a far-reaching effect on the organizational culture yet, especially in the federal sector, are admittedly set in their ways and often not interested in personal transformation. One can only speculate on the terrible effect an executive with the "I am too old to change" or "I am set in my ways" mentality can have on the human resources within any particular organization. This thinking is arguably immoral, surely self serving, and has no place within the paradigm of good leadership. All organizational members can and should continue to develop throughout their entire career regardless of rank or tenure.

First, it is important to recognize the transformation process in development. The Fishbein-Ajzen (Ajzen, 1989) framework (Figure 1) is one example that illustrates a causal chain "in which behavior is determined by intentions to perform the behavior, intentions follow from overall evaluations or attitudes, and these attitudes are a function of salient beliefs" (Ajzen, p. 248). Using this model as a foundation, developing leaders must first challenge the current values and beliefs of an individual before he/she will successfully achieve the desired job- and self-related behaviors needed to meet the challenges in today's organizations.

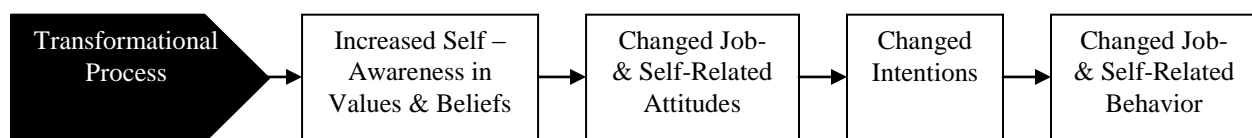


Figure 1. Model illustrating the Fishbein-Ajzen framework (Ajzen, 1989).

There is therefore a recognized need for customized leader development programs that address an organizational member's strengths and weaknesses and encourages individual participation in personal transformation. Additionally, many programs currently forego the challenge of developing "soft" skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, moral judgment, motivation, empathy, social skills, and self-motivation; and, since these skill sets are critical for successful leadership, the development of such skills within the individual is vital for the success of organizational programs (Day, 2001; Newell, 2002). It is also safe to say that leader development is *good* only if it enables the individual to translate gains in knowledge to wisdom (which can be thought of as the contextual integration and synthesis of knowledge) and wisdom to appropriate action, a developmental challenge that should not be underestimated. The attempted transfer of knowledge is often assumed to create wisdom as well as personal transformation, but this should not be assumed. At a minimum, when considering leader development, it may be helpful to be skeptical that knowledge will actually be transferred as intended and that the learner's ability to contextualize the knowledge should be experientially demonstrated for verification.

Fostering a Culture of Transformation

In order to respond to more personalized leader development needs, organizational executives are looking for more effective alternative methodologies. Thus, we recommend establishing leader development programs that include a diverse, yet competency focused, array of learning technologies, options, and experiences. Furthermore, a researched framework for leader development and transformative approach to encouraging self-directed lifelong learning through assessment, challenge, support, and accountability is necessary to achieve sustainable behavioral change within individuals. If organizational executives seek effective leader development yet restrict learning to online training or a few lecture-based PowerPoint presentations per year, the organization should rather spend the time, money, and effort elsewhere. Real leader development takes substantial organizational commitment, and it is our belief that organizations that determine to commit to the endeavor will be more efficient and competitive in the long run.

Conclusion

Several assumptions need to be dispelled. First, any organizational member in any role or position can be developed to become a more effective leader by humbly approaching an experiential process of leader development informed with scientifically sound research-based set of principles and practices (Day et al., 2009). Second, leader development occurs at multiple levels in an ongoing, dynamic fashion across the lifespan of the employee. Therefore, an intentional intervention is only one small piece of a lifelong and self-directed learning attitude that must be nurtured and encouraged. Further, as Day and Halpin noted in their 2001 U.S. Army report on leader development, "Leadership development is popularly regarded as a competitive capability that is intertwined with organizational strategy" (Day & Halpin, p. 2). The key for a successful program is to build a sound, research-based model that informs the design of the program; to measure the outcomes and effectiveness; and to be consistent in implementation knowing that "Implementation is a key ingredient for success" (Day & Halpin, p. 3).

Leader development is the responsibility of the organizational executives and the individual members. If one or the other lacks commitment, the leader development program is likely to fail. By clearly understanding the objective to develop the leadership abilities of all organizational members, the executives address the current culture as well as the need for succession management. Finally, it is likely that leader development will continue to be even more of a competitive advantage as organizations continue to search for ways to maximize the incredible potential of their human resources.

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