



Critical and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development

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Abstract

This article is the introduction to the special issue on 'Critical and Alternative Approaches to Leadership Learning and Development'. This article reviews the past approaches to researching and theorising about leadership learning and development and proposes a shift towards critical and alternative approaches. This article then describes the various articles in the special issue and how they contribute towards this paradigm shift.

Keywords

Critical management education, leadership development, learning

Introduction

The initial idea for this special issue originated in the theme and contributions to the second Developing Leadership Capacity Conference (DLCC) held at the Bristol Business School in 2010, the theme of which was critical reflections and practical answers for leadership development and learning. The conference produced some in-depth and critical discussions regarding alternative views of leadership development, with the following year's conference – on the theme of

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'Leadership Development and Life Experience: Reflections on Becoming Leaders' – consolidating the emerging idea for this special issue. In this introduction, we seek to briefly review the existing literature on leadership learning and development and outline the predominantly essentialist and normative path that this literature has taken over the last 30 years. In response to this trend, the focus of this special issue is to encourage critical and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development. The articles included in this special issue take the subject area forward in theoretical and empirical terms.

Leadership development and learning: a review of past themes?

John Burgoyne and Kim Turnbull-James (2001) proposed best practice guidelines for leadership development as a response to the increased interest and activity in this field. They suggested that strategic leadership development must (a) be driven from the top: if the chief executive officer (CEO) is not intimately involved and committed to it, it is not worth starting; (b) support and drive the business: if it is not core to an organisation's strategy, it will not happen and (c) be culturally attuned: it must reflect the culture of the organisation. Although this provides guidance to organisations in navigating a large and competitive area, the extent to which individuals can 'learn' to lead and the impact of leadership development on organisations have remained elusive questions in the literature. Hence, our focus in this special issue is on a more critical appreciation of and alternative approaches to leadership learning and development.

Over the last 20 years, there is evidence of an increased discourse regarding leadership development courses and programmes (Day, 2000; Gill, 2006), which suggests that they are seen as a source of competitive advantage (McCall, 1998; Vicere and Fulmer, 1998) in organisations that have significant financial pay-offs (Collins and Holton, 2004). These programmes therefore are increasingly popular (Cacioppe, 1998) and expensive (Fulmer, 1997). Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes – and particularly executive MBA programmes – are a significant element within this trend, with such programmes often appearing as a proxy for leadership learning in the literature (e.g. Auken et al., 2005; Baruch and Leeming, 2001). Ironically, the much vaunted demise of the MBA (e.g. Connolly, 2003; Pfeiffer and Fong, 2002) seems to have done little to remedy this potentially lazy thinking, and the idea of intervening to develop leadership ability is now considered to be within the mainstream of academic degrees in modern business schools (Gabriel, 2005; Gill, 2004). Elsewhere, leadership development programmes have a long history in military organisations (e.g. Adair, 2005) and started to gain currency in other forms of organisation around the mid-1970s (Edwards et al., 2002; Van Velsor et al., 2010). These early programmes were ultimately self-developmental in nature and promoted the Maslowvian (Maslow, 1968) ideals of self-awareness, self-control and self-realisation or actualisation in conjunction with methodologies of an experiential nature (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Mainemelis et al., 2002) grounded in Learning Styles Theory (e.g. Honey and Mumford, 1989). This appears to have been the norm outside business schools until the 1990s when the transformational leadership concept (e.g. Bass, 1985) started to ingrain itself in the academic as well as the practitioner worlds. With this, we see the development of the 'Full Range Leadership' programme (Avolio, 1999) that promoted the development of transformational leadership skills, sometimes to the detriment of other perspectives and certainly in favour of transactional leadership skills (Edwards and Gill, 2012). In addition to these forms of programme, the psychometric analysis of leadership behaviour has also become the norm in organisations with tools such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio, 1995) and the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ) (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2001). Finally, and most recently, there has been a focus

on authentic leadership development (Cooper et al., 2005), which suggests a process of ethical awareness alongside leadership development. These essentialist and normative ideals (essentialist in the sense of leadership development being presumed as indispensable by organisations, as noted above, and normative in the sense of being prescriptive regarding what is required across differing contexts) are indicative of leadership development in past years and of the business community's tendency towards what they view as readily practical interventions in preference to a more reflective approach (e.g. Gray, 2007; Smith, 2001). There has also been criticism of these approaches (including activities such as 360° feedback, coaching, mentoring, networking, job assignments and action learning) of being too individually focused and that there is a need for more socially orientated (see Day, 2000 for further elaboration) and systemic (Collins, 2001; Collins and Holton, 2004) approaches to leadership development. These approaches reflect a focus towards alternative and critical approaches to leadership development and learning.

Alternative and critical approaches to leadership development and learning

More recent studies of leadership development and learning appear to relate back to its experiential nature (Stead and Elliott, 2009; Waldman et al., 2006) and the development of leadership practice from a relational, social and situated perspective through a process of 'becoming' (Cunliffe, 2009; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Parker, 2004). This research has also encouraged leadership development practices to become more contextually situated and therefore has built on Burgoyne and Stewart's (1977) work on naturalistic leadership learning and wider notions of situated leadership learning (e.g. Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Janson, 2008; McCall, 2004). Arguably, this trend runs parallel to the recent focus on the need for authenticity in leadership (e.g. Avolio and Gardner, 2005) and the recognition of the need for congruence in and a relational perspective (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) on leadership practice. From the literature on the process of 'becoming' in particular, there appears a need for the leadership development and learning literature to appreciate the aspects of emotion, in particular anxiety and desire in the process of 'becoming' a leader and in 'being' a leader. In addition, it appears that leadership learning and development should reconnect with context (Fairhurst, 2009; Jepson, 2009; Liden and Antonakis, 2009; Osborn et al., 2002; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006) and community (Edwards, 2011) and become inclusive and welcoming of critical and creative views discussed further as follows. Alternative approaches to leadership learning and development therefore suggest a further elaboration on these themes and ultimately furthering knowledge, theory, research and practice through an appreciation of different and innovative approaches.

One area that is being developed as an alternative view and that better appreciates context as well as emotions of becoming and being a leader is the move towards aesthetic and artistic methods of management and leadership learning and development (Gayá Wicks and Rippin, 2010; Hansen and Bathhurst, 2011; Taylor et al., 2002). This use of non-cognitive methods such as art enables participants to access intuitions, feelings, stories, improvisation, experience, imagination, active listening, awareness in the moment, novel words and empathy (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009), which contribute to a wider appreciation of leadership in and of organisations. This is one of the topic areas that we seek to explore in this special issue.

In addition, contemporary developments in leadership theorising have drawn on a variety of theoretical perspectives, including poststructuralist, discursive, critical, aesthetic and feminist perspectives to highlight the significance of identity work and regulation, gender and power within leadership development and practice (Collinson, 2005; Fletcher, 2004; Ford, 2006; Ford et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2005). These more critical perspectives on leadership learning and development

are the second area we seek to advance within this special issue. Indeed, the work around leadership and identity (Ford, 2010 and Ford et al., 2008) has important implications for leadership learning and development. For example, Jackie Ford and colleagues highlight the performative nature of leadership literature and indeed the leadership learning and development discourse. The dominant writing on leadership and the hype around leadership development in contemporary organisations has an influence on how leadership identities are constructed, this being largely masculine, aggressive and controlling self-reliant 'perfect beings'. Managers are therefore encouraged to 'become' leaders and adopt an identity prescribed by the literature and by leadership development programmes. This emerging critical strand of the leadership literature therefore suggests that leadership development and learning should avoid presenting leadership as a fixed identity or role, instead encouraging an awareness of multiple roles (leader, follower and both). In addition, leadership learning and development should strengthen voices of alternative models to the masculine, aggressive and individualistic one. The articles presented in this special issue move these agendas forward in a meaningful way to provide future research and theory in this area with a platform from which to develop.

Themes of the special issue

This special issue aims to continue these recent threads with a set of articles that extend perspectives of leadership learning and development towards the critical and alternative approaches. This special issue therefore has within it a selection of articles that explore innovative and alternative approaches and interventions that have not received attention in the mainstream leadership learning and development literature.

As can be seen from the following articles, there is an array of interesting innovative and critical notions that have been discussed and empirically regarded. In article one, for example, Birgit Schyns and colleagues explore the role of implicit leadership theories in the process of leadership and leader development, drawing a distinction between traditional trait and behaviour-based approaches to implicit theories of leadership and more open-ended approaches encompassing relational and emotional elements. By acknowledging the importance of context and the role of followers in leadership/leader development, she seeks to contest the often prescriptive stance of traditional leadership development interventions, which seek to shape would-be leaders to fit a predefined model of what a leader should be (Ford and Harding, 2007), suggesting instead the value to be gained by acknowledging both leader and follower implicit theories of leadership and providing space and resources for participants to explore the implications of theories on both sides for how they want to be as a leader. The article critically explores the findings of a drawing activity with undergraduate, postgraduate and executive students and suggests some interesting insights into the implicit theories at work here – for example, the relative absence of followers from the pictures and the frequent focus on heads rather than whole people as a largely rational view of leadership – as well as the more expected gender and race stereotypes. Schyns concludes by discussing the potential of the drawing exercise for overcoming some of the potential barriers to leadership learning implicit in more traditional methods, together with the implication for the kind of leaders we might want to develop based on the implicit theories that emerged.

In another contribution, Ian Sutherland joins the debate surrounding reflexivity in management development through a consideration of experiential learning as a 'process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984: 41). The article is in response to the traditionally rational, instrumental and economically dominated approach to management development and contributes to the recently increasing interest in the complex, dynamic, chaotic and

subjective interactional environments that constitute contemporary organisational contexts and the leadership skills and abilities which these demand. In this context, the advantage of arts-based methodologies is seen as being its ability to leverage aesthetic experiences to generate the non-rational, non-logical capabilities needed to navigate and respond to uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity: to reconfigure themselves in order to see more and see differently. Sutherland uses an inductive, grounded research methodology to analyse descriptive essays written by executive MBA students in response to their experience of a choral conducting masterclass as a route to leadership development. The three-stage model that emerges suggests that such methods afford *aesthetic workspaces* in which this self-configuration can take place through processes of reflection and *aesthetic reflexivity* and which generate *memories with momentum* that remain salient and informative for future professional practice. Through these stages, the learning environment was seen to be purposefully framed, evocatively aestheticized and de-routinized – all of which served to produce a frame changing, memorable learning experience, well beyond what more traditional approaches to leadership development often call forth.

Elisabeth Kelan contributes to the growing literature acknowledging the significance of the visual in management and organisation studies. While Schyns and colleagues ask students to draw a leader, Kelan explores how MBA students position themselves in relation to media images of women business leaders. Using the business school environment to explore how gendered ‘becoming’ in relation to dress and physical appearance take place, Kelan draws on feminist media studies to highlight ways in which identities are constructed in relation to media images, thus offering an innovative contribution to our understandings of the intersections between gender, management and leadership learning. In conducting videoed interviews with 20 MBA students (10 female and 10 male), representing a range of ethnicities and nationalities, two key themes emerged. The students (a) made judgements on the industry-appropriateness of the women’s appearance and (b) a majority of students commented on the relationship between sexual attractiveness and women’s professionalism, alluding to what they regarded as the opposition between sexual attraction and being a professional woman. For these MBA students, to become, and to be seen, as a business-woman therefore requires future women leaders to scrutinise what is deemed appropriate according to their industry and to not appear too glamorous or sexy!

Valerie Stead’s article focuses on how six women leaders in a UK university learn to deploy (in)visibility in their negotiation of gendered organisational processes and practices. Starting from a position that conceives leadership learning as a socially situated tacit process, her article seeks to extend and deepen this understanding by introducing the concept of (in)visibility, more commonly encountered in feminist theory and research. As an analytic lens (in)visibility illuminates the variety of ways in which gender is revealed and concealed in organisations, and therefore alerts us to the nuances of women’s leadership learning and how they might choose to deploy (in)visibility as a tactical tool. Stead’s analysis of the six interviews identified three categories of experience: experiences of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ forms of (in)visibility, experiences of (in)visibility due to stereotypical expectations and experiences of revealing and concealing their learning about (in)visibility. In discussing how the women leaders learn to deploy (in)visibility, Stead’s analysis reveals how power relations and gender relations are interwoven. For example, when members of recruitment panels, the women leaders revealed ambivalence about their role and the opportunities presented; they simultaneously presented important learning opportunities, but gendered networks of power could easily exclude women from participation in such processes.

Michael Tomlinson and colleagues take a Bourdieusian approach, drawing particularly on his concepts of symbolic violence and capitals, to an analysis of ‘centrally initiated’ public service leadership development programmes. Undertaking their research in four English public service

sector organisations, they draw on data from 121 interviews, including those with senior politicians and central government civil servants, and present a critical analysis of policy leaders' and public service leaders' motivations for and understandings of formal leadership development and its impact. They suggest that in the case of their selected public service organisations, leadership development emanating from central government can be conceived as 'a mechanism for the inculcation and development of the social, symbolic and cultural capitals' associated with the 'cultural logic of leadership'. For leaders subject to leadership development, this is positioned as being a means through which they can widen their influence within the organisation. This highlights further the extent to which these development programmes 'serve as a means to maintaining domination' of the elite through the collusion of organisational leaders to legitimate 'the reproductive power of those who dominate them'.

An additional article by Ken Parry and Steve Kempster associated with this special issue will be published in a later issue of Management Learning. Parry and Kempster's article attempts to move beyond the mainstream conceptions of charismatic leadership to explore the identity and narrative it takes on in an organisational context. Using aesthetic narrative positivism, it considers the emotions that charismatic leadership generates. Based on data from 98 MBA students and executives, Parry and Kempster conclude that the charismatic leadership narrative is one of an enjoyable and supportive family, which includes a place for discipline and tough love when required. Within this narrative, the charismatic leader is required to take on the role of a respected family member, creating an enjoyable and rewarding work context by being a supportive and caring colleague, but not a friend. Would-be leaders, it is suggested, need to intentionally adopt this archetypal identity as part of their leadership development.

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