Leadership development: the heart of the matter

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Educators have a comparative advantage over other professionals when it comes to leadership development. They should exploit it in the years ahead to improve the enterprise for which they are responsible. Whether they can capture the moment, take advantage of their deeper understanding of teaching and learning and skirt some of the expensive miscues that prevent others from being an effective force in leadership development remains to be seen. This article assembles and discusses the components necessary for making the most of the present set of circumstances. It explores the terrain of contemporary initiatives in leadership development, critiques the assumptions on which they are based, and makes a case for the more cost-effective deployment of experiential approaches to educating leaders.

The nature of the subject

Leadership development is about teaching leadership. The role of teacher is to create and carry out a mix of activities that will have a positive impact on learners, in terms of the subject being taught. In the contemporary context, the subject of leadership requires learners to become adept at shaping and fulfilling, not only their own aims, but those of their followers as well. As James O'Toole (1995) notes in *Leading Change*, leadership based on imposing one's will on others increasingly engenders negative rather than positive effects.

Instrumental to leadership development is a wide range of aptitudes and capabilities, all of which affect a person's interactions with co-workers, constituents or customers – personal qualities, moral commitments and management skills. The effects of leadership development are most directly felt in the social setting of an organization, where leaders and followers attempt to work together to attain common goals (Terry, 1993).

Over the past century, as organizations have grown and their numbers spread across the landscape of human endeavor, concern with leadership development has widened and deepened. In fact, it is fair to say that the quality of leadership available to organizations and institutions has reached the threshold of becoming a major preoccupation within industrialized nations. This should not be surprising since the performance of the people in charge is rather consequential, when most of us depend on the entities they lead for both our sustenance and sense of well-being.

To merit the label preoccupation, an issue must draw considerable comment over a sustained period from experts and others with enough time on their hands to find a public outlet for their opinions. Like the proverbial elephant, the issue must supply enough mass for pundits to be able to step back, take sightings and assert, with little fear of contradiction, that they have described a substantial part of what is in front of them. The topic of leadership development admirably fulfills these requirements. A cursory reading of the trade journals reveals extensive discussion of various parts of the ample bulk of the leadership development elephant.

Current dimensions

There are four major dimensions to leadership development. Taken together, they represent a useful way of fitting the parts of the elephant into a manageable frame. Included are:

1 *Who* should do leadership development?
2 *When*, or within what time frame, should it be done?
3 *Where* should leadership development occur, or on whose turf should experiences be organized?
4 *How* should it unfold, or what materials and methods should be used to teach leadership?

First *who*. Four decades ago the answer unequivocally would have been that university professors should teach leadership, especially those in business and public administration, and perhaps also in education. In the last third of a century, however, consultants have become an established and significant part of the leadership teaching corps. Their principal leverage in the field derives from an ability to respond much more quickly and directly than the professorate to expressed needs within the workplace itself. To such immediacy the academy never intended, nor was equipped, to respond: so universities continue to concentrate on the long-term development of leaders, separate from the specific organizational context in which they work. Consultants can focus more on short-term development of groups faced with specific challenges within an organizational setting.

Recently, there has been increasing sentiment voiced that neither professors nor consultants can do the job of teaching leadership as well as executives, or leaders themselves. Accepting the criticism of present-day leadership development as "too rote, too backward-

looking, too theoretical" (Cohen and Tichy, 1997), several leading thinkers make the case that organizational leaders themselves should take responsibility for developing leaders at all levels in their organizations. In one ground-breaking approach executives themselves formulate their own stories about "ideas, values, edge and energy," and they share them with subordinates in the firm. Drawn from their own experience, the stories become the principal tools for building co-workers' leadership skills and capacities (Cohen and Tichy, 1997).

The matter of who should do leadership development has some obvious appeal in that it identifies, albeit innocuously, heroes and villains and designates ownership rights. There is really not much of substance to the issue itself, however. In many, if not most instances, individuals of a similar background wind up with central roles as teachers; it just so happens that they are at different points in their careers when they are engaged as such.

A common scenario is the former executive who becomes a consultant and then a part-time professor, before turning into an executive again, only to close a career as a professor and/or consultant. The edge that a professor might bring to leadership development, as opposed to a consultant or an executive, is solely one of perspective and breadth of understanding. These are related as much to the requisites of what should be done and how, as to who does it.

In the example cited above Cohen and Tichy (1997) assert a prominent role for executives in leadership development, but it is their own frame, not the executives', that supplies direction for the program. So when analysts offer a prominent position to the question of who should do leadership development, they are really using it as a way of provoking questions about content and methodology.

Second, *when* should the teaching of leadership be in short bursts of time or drawn out over longer periods? How much sustained, continuous time should be allocated? Should the time allocated to formal instruction be interspersed among longer periods of on-the-job experience, whether through organized practice sessions or apprenticeships?

Just as the matter of *who* cannot be separated from the question of *what* and *how*, neither can the matter of *when*. Time and timing are critical adjuncts of content and methodology, because they connect to the question of sequencing and its close partner, cumulative effects. That a project group can

handle with great facility a charged issue involving ethnic differences is more than a matter of good fortune. Such facility has roots in the group's prior learning. Perhaps it was fostered through a series of seemingly inconsequential, set-up exercises experienced in the first week the group spent together (Kaagan, unpublished).

With more time, there can be greater impact if the learning challenges are the right ones and they are ordered properly. Interspersing periods of instruction with periods of practice, stage-setting activity or just plain fun, may be the best use of available time. Letting discomfiting new ideas settle and take hold in a real work context, and then later, in a more remote environment, asking participants to reexamine and reshape their thinking in light of recent on-the-job experience may be the most effective ordering of elements.

A solid and enduring commitment to collaboration, for example, cannot be molded solely in the hothouse setting of a training center, nor even in the more natural milieu of the workplace itself. Carefully interweaving experiences in both settings over time might produce the desired effects. The determinant of when to do something is what to do and how to carry it off.

Third, *where* should leadership development activities take place; in a university classroom? Or, in a retreat center off the work site? Or perhaps in special training facilities at the work site? Or, in unfamiliar wilderness settings, or even more remote venues like soup kitchens? Or, in the work settings of other organizations doing the same kind of work as those undergoing training? Clearly the options are more diverse today than they have ever been. Leaderless groups in a pleasant rural setting, team building aboard rubber rafts on a fast-running river, and service projects in the underground haunts of the homeless in a large city now complement expert lectures and Socratic give-and-take offered in amphitheater-style classrooms of noted business schools. Undersea or outer space may be the only frontiers left untapped.

The question of place, like that of who offers leadership education and in what time frame, is subsidiary to decision making about content and methodology. A program designer does not *a priori* decide that it would be beneficial to take a group of middle managers into the outback for two weeks of sustained team leadership training. There is usually an aim in mind, whether well- or ill-conceived, explicit or implicit, and choice of place

relates to how best to achieve that aim. The outback can offer participants all the educational advantages of considerable discomfort, just as a lush resort can offer all the educational advantages of comfort. Either one, or both, could be essential for learning, or conversely, could stand in the way of learning. It all depends on the objectives; and objectives govern content and methodology.

Increasingly, those who teach leadership seek to fit place to purpose, and in many instances to alternate places depending on different purposes. Integrated, three-week programs can take place in several different venues. They might begin with a short stint in the wilderness, followed by classroom or retreat center sessions, and then involve a move to an urban site for service projects. The current literature on leadership development is in fact replete with descriptions of programs that take place in multiple sites. For example, Vicere (1996) describes three very differently configured programs – the Center for Creative Leadership's Leaderlab, AT&T's Leadership Development Program and Aramark's Executive Leadership Institute. Each offers locales that purportedly complement the aims they are seeking to achieve.

Fourth, *what* and *how*. The central concerns for those designing and doing leadership development are objectives, content and methodology. These three are the wellsprings of a program. They determine the quality of the experiences participants have. Ultimately the impact on participants, in terms of what they do in the workplace, stems from these. If the *what* and *how* are solid, they can actually overcome deficiencies in the *where* and *when*, and perhaps even the *who*. But the reverse is not the case.

From the point of view of the participants, the principal vehicles for leadership development, in terms of content and methodology, include the following:
- listening to a lecture;
- engaging in discussion with peers, alone or with coaches or consultants;
- pursuing a formal dialogue (Bohm, 1992) with peers, supervisors, supervisees or some combination of these;
- analyzing a case study of another organization's problems or of one's own;
- going through a short or long experience with peers, supervisors, supervisees, or some combination of these, and then debriefing it. The shared experience could be drawn from one's own workplace or someone else's. Or it could be constructed

from natural circumstances, like the ones a wilderness setting provides, or artificial ones, like those conjured in games and simulations;
- discussing with a coach or mentor a designated problem; and
- undergoing a leadership assessment, either via a survey instrument or through expert observation of behavior, exhibited either on-the-job or in a lab setting.

Naturally, any one of these experiences can take on one or more characteristics, depending on desired content specifications. The material that participants engage with, for example, could be highly theoretical or quite practical. At the same time, it could span both, by prodding participants to formulate mental models of the behavior they exhibit on the job (Argyris, 1992; Senge, 1993), or providing them with open-ended opportunities to assess their effectiveness as professionals (Schon, 1983). Alternatively, the material might encourage participants to generate, and try out, new ideas and concepts, or it could focus specifically on past actions and the determination of immediate next steps in the workplace.

In another vein altogether, some of what is put in front of participants might relate to their particular work environment. While still reflective of real world challenges, the material could include issues and problems that obtain in a wide range of settings. On the other hand, it might, on its face, have little apparent relevance to particular organizational contexts, or even to issues or problems that broadly diverse participants see as germane to their work situations. In contrast, the content could be timeless and enduring, relating to how human beings face a variety of challenges that transcend any organizational milieu. Taking a different perspective altogether, it might be tied to this year's work plan and have little foreseeable impact beyond that time frame.

Closing out the range of possibilities, the material could be quite technical or scientific, involving the acquisition of so-called hard skills. If not purely technical, its principal attribute could be its objectivity, with the consequent presence or absence of attainable skills easily discernable by observation or survey. In contrast, the material in front of participants could emphasize the personal and interpersonal, involving so-called soft skills, touching upon the emotional, and perhaps even the spiritual dimensions of getting a job done.

▌From the literature, some misleading assumptions

It ought to be abundantly apparent, from the rendering of options just offered, that the content and methodology of leadership development comprise a deep and thick wood. This should serve as ample warning to all who think that one should achieve thoughtfulness to the point of rigor and care to the point of compassion. Regrettably, content and methodology have not received the judicious treatment they deserve. The contemporary literature on leadership development – as represented in recent issues of *Organizational Dynamics*, *Across the Board*, *The Journal of Management Development*, *The Administrative Science Quarterly* – betrays a coverage of these critical dimensions that is superficial at best.

This superficiality is most apparent in the assumptions made about the most appropriate means of developing leadership capacity. Conveyed as if they were givens offering essential guidance for program development, these assumptions include the following:
- Issues and problems drawn from the work place of the participants provide the most fruitful learning challenges for contemporary leadership development.
- Experiential learning activities, organized in one form or another outside traditional instructional settings, are generally better than learning activities that are classroom-based.
- A highly diverse program that includes a market basket of methodologies is generally superior to an approach that is one-dimensional.
- The *who*, *when* and *where* of program development deserve the same level of attention as the *what* and *how*.

The problem with these assumptions is not that are flatly false. Quite the contrary, there is a good deal of validity in them. Their principal defect is that they are misleading: they do not point the way to the most artful and cost-effective leadership development treatments. The first assumption is that the most fitting material for leadership development is the problems and issues that dominate in the workplace of the participants. Rather than invalidating the assumption outright, it is fitting to offer the simple rejoinder, drawn from tenets of good teaching, that participants in leadership development programs should spend as much time away from workplace problems and issues as they do in their midst. They could benefit equally from

grappling with unfamiliar circumstances as from dealing with familiar ones. Assuredly, the unfamiliar should contain elements reminiscent enough to touch responsive chords in the participants. At the same time, its differences should aid participants in overcoming dysfunctional patterns that plague them in the workplace.

It might seem that the second assumption, the desirability of experiential learning away from a classroom-type setting, is the counter to many of the downsides stemming from the first. Unfortunately, as the literature itself demonstrates, this is not the case. Experiential in most instances in the literature means "exotic", a set of experiences conducted off-site, from which participants are supposed to glean important lessons they can then bring back to their workplace. In essence, what is offered as experiential is the experience in and of itself, usually an activity involving high intensity and high cost. A week at an outward bound program for 20 top managers is a fitting example.

The nub of the problem with program decisions predicated on the second assumption is they are an "expensive half loaf," not much better than "no loaf at all." Whereas participant experience is certainly central to leadership development, it must contain not only a set of activities but also an effective means of distilling the learning that the activities promote. The only way this can happen is if an able teacher assists participants with concept formation and possible application to their work place. Well-facilitated discussion is central to an experience, not supplementary. It captures the learning and makes appropriate connections with the workplace (Kaagan, unpublished).

As important, experiential does not have to mean extreme, remote and costly. It can mean mild, proximate and inexpensive. Low intensity experiences provided participants within the four walls of a classroom can lead to vigorous discussions, with great potential for leadership learning. It is often unnecessary to take a group away for an intensive, week-long training session in the wilderness. With a group that is ready, several hours of active engagement with a well-chosen exercise in an ample-sized room can produce marked effects.

On the third assumption, there is no doubt that highly diversified leadership-development treatments can make for rich learning opportunities. A week of outward bound, followed by a week of lectures and discussions on a university campus, and then a final week of a service project in a city center may

be the right mix to create impact. The other side of the coin is that such programs may be overdone, full of costly moves that are not necessary for the achievement of a specific set of objectives. Much preferred are exquisitely differentiated objectives, clearly articulated at the outset, with targeted responses by way of proposed activities. To do things this way, hard-nosed design work is essential, with its primary focus the content and methodology of a program, tied very cleanly to a set of explicit purposes.

I have already explained in full above why the fourth assumption misleads – that is, putting the *who*, *where* and *when* on a par with the *what* and *how*. It is important, however, to add here that directing the eye away from content and methodology increases the possibility that they will remain underexamined. If the attention is dispersed, then the amount of inquiry directed at any one element will likely be insufficient. This is the case with the present state of the literature on leadership development.

Unfortunate consequences of being misled

Unfortunate consequences accompany actions based on the four assumptions. Topping the list, program quality has suffered, and the costs of putting leadership development programs on have become needlessly exorbitant. Loss of quality is the result of not tying activity tightly to purpose. Fine-grained decision making about the least expensive yet most effective means to an end is not occurring. Excess is the result of making leadership development programs into conglomerations of *what*s and *how*s, the total cost of which is frequently unjustifiable.

In stark contrast, strong cumulative impact on participants can be achieved if there are the following present: careful attention paid to the choice and sequencing of program elements; an understanding exhibited of participants' needs for trying out new ideas on safe ground, away from their workplace; a right balance struck between wrestling with ideas on an individual basis as opposed to a group basis; and patience shown in terms of bringing the issues back home to the workplace. Failure to make the right moves and to effect the right order of moves inevitably leads to redundancies and to the needless expenditure of resources.

The demand for better leaders and consequently for more expansive leadership development efforts is strong and likely to become stronger in the years ahead. In this accelerating rush to create new and better programs, many leadership development sponsors have let their appetites for grandiosity overtake their penchant for good judgment. Lost is deference to the principle that well-crafted, modest interventions targeted to achievable ends, and tied to broader, long-range aims, may in the end produce more profoundly positive and enduring effects.

What is needed is a grounded presentation that ties activities to objectives, that is explicit about objectives, content and methodology, that offers solid substance for leaders, trainers and others who teach leadership. The overarching goal should be to preserve and extend the advancements contained in the present set of initiatives, while setting aside the fluff. Inevitably the blush will come off the rose of leadership development in its current forms, and organizational leaders will seek out more refined and economical approaches, decrying the excesses of the current array.

A wiser path

As one looks to the horizon of leadership development programming, here are purposes that should be accorded high priority. While distilled into a few pages, they undergird an approach to leadership development that several leading thinkers believe comes close to the heart of the matter (Bolman and Deal, 1994; Clarke and Clarke, 1994).

The primary "text" which participants should invest in is shared experience – possibly, a set of group exercises built of artificial circumstances and conditions. Needless to say, this sort of text is very different from that which is purchased in a bookstore, a package of ideas contained between two covers. Experience is raw and immediate, messy and open-ended. As such, it places unusual demands on all who seek to use it for learning and further professional development. Yet, when appropriately facilitated, its potential as a learning tool is limitless.

As teacher-leaders we should have those whom we teach reflect more carefully on what we do together and make connections with what they do outside in the real world. Primarily from their reflections on experience – provoked with carefully phrased and sequenced questions – participants can begin to reconstruct, reform and revise the ideas they have about the practice of organizational leadership. Only secondarily and as a support should reference be made to the body of expert opinion found in books and articles as

we inquire together into the meaning of our experiences. In fact, it is worth recalling that expert commentary is nothing more than the outcome of experts carefully reflecting on their own experiences.

Make no mistake, the "bridging leap" asked of learners here is enormous. From dwelling with a teacher and with each other on their experiences to forming and attaching themselves to new concepts of leadership and management that they can bring into their workplace – this involves considerable reach and strain. Yet one can be assured that if they become emotionally engaged – discomfited or satisfied, pleased or concerned, agitated or composed – because of what is happening around and to them; if their attitudes and those of their peers can remain unfrozen, even if momentarily; and if they begin to make initial connections between their own experience in an exercise and new ideas about what might make sense to do at work, the positive impact on them will be significant and enduring.

The ready order that emerges from an instructor expounding a specific idea or set of ideas is not present in the approach just described. Therefore, focus is more difficult to attain. But if attained, albeit unevenly, through emotion-filled and value-laden direct experience, the hold of the new ideas on participants will be much more secure (Proudman, 1992). The bricks, i.e. good ideas, will not only be in place, but they will be secured with ample mortar, i.e. accompanying feelings and attitudes.

Contrast the approach just described, for example, with "receiving the word" from noted experts, in person, on a big screen, or via the written word. While expert opinion, however conveyed, is targeted and lucid, it is less likely to promote altered practices. However cogent it might be, it is inevitably sterile in that it is detached from the lives of the participants.

The roots of experiential learning
In laboring in these fields we should be acutely aware of borrowing the ideas of others. Foremost is John Dewey whose *Education and Experience* is seminal. Offered first as a lecture to a professional society in 1938, it set the stage for most of the expert commentary on experiential learning that followed. To Dewey (1938):

> every experience enacted and undergone, modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences.

He goes on to offer two interrelated principles, or criteria, of experience that lend themselves well to anyone who wants to capitalize on experience for learning. The first is continuity, the second interaction. The idea of continuity is that experiences build on each other. "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (Dewey, 1938). The idea of interaction is that experience involves a person with what is around him. "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and his environment" (Dewey, 1938), whether other people, an issue, a book or whatever constitutes that environment.

Within the frame of these transactions the rich drama of human impulses, needs and desires unfolds, and from them people seek a sense of purpose and meaning. Notes Dewey, humans are by nature not satisfied with merely observing experience. Their impulses, needs and desires compel them to understand its significance, and ultimately to push them toward a sense of purpose.

> A purpose is an end-view.
> The formation of purposes … involves
> (1) observation of surrounding conditions;
> (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past … and
> (3) judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify (Dewey, 1938).

The principles of continuity and interaction in experience and the inevitable march to a sense of purpose are central to the dynamics thoughtful educators should seek to create in the space chosen for leadership learning, be it a meeting room of a hotel, the spacious lawn of a nearby park or an academic classroom. These spaces are quite ample for common experiences, in the form of group exercises, simulations or problems. Specially designed and constructed, they are meant to pose significant leadership quandaries. Contrary to what many might say, they are not "fake" or "unreal" experiences. As "a rose is a rose," an experience is an experience, whether it occurs in an office, on the way home from work, or in a classroom or training center.

The difference between constructed experience and that of everyday work life is that the former takes place in a fashioned lab setting away from the multiple demands of the latter. It is quite consciously removed from the demands and norms of the work environment. Such experiences allow people time and space to reflect on their own behavior, in somewhat less precarious circumstances than those where jobs and reputations are at

stake. In effect, they take place on "safe ground", often essential for people to open themselves to learning.

In his landmark work, *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schon (1983) offers strong substantiation of the need for "safe ground," especially when important leadership capacities like risk taking and collaboration are at stake. Schon argues for the expanded exercise of what he calls reflection-in-action by professionals. This capacity goes beyond technical expertise, inviting a professional to respond to uncertain and complex circumstances by surfacing key operating assumptions and analyzing them even in the middle of ongoing work.

From one of the cases he presents, Schon (1983) concludes that "the reflection-in-action of managers is distinctive in that they operate in an organizational context and deal with organizational phenomena" which involve "a system of games and norms which both guide and limit the directions of organizational inquiry". In situations where managers must take certain actions to preserve their position and image, these games and norms become "diseases that prevent their own cure" (Schon, 1983). The effects on organizational performance are inevitably negative.

Schon's account beckons the creation of circumstances in which people who aspire to leadership are compelled to take a larger view, to look more at the big picture and at underlying assumptions driving actions and reactions, in a setting removed from the disabling games and norms of the organizations in which they work. Such conditions provide participants a necessary opportunity to work through the multiple, intertwined observations of experiential phenomena.

The intent is to advance the level and quality of those observations to the point where participants begin to engage in serious "reflection-in-action," and ultimately in the formation of new concepts. The work that facilitator and participants do together in this context becomes an exercise in "hyper-observation," leading to an analysis of working assumptions (theories-in-action), and to a reframing of operating principles, ground rules that govern future action. It is axiomatic that such a progression cannot take place within the confines of an organization's work space. The fresh air of experiential exercises conducted off the work site offers an efficient way of surfacing working assumptions for serious review and revision.

Endemic to effective interaction with participants in the exercises is drawing them up short, into an analysis of "what has just taken place in this room." The situation that has just arisen is held up as a manifestation of an issue or problem that has to be dealt with outside this room, in the real world. To repeat an earlier contention, the experience participants and teacher are having in the exercise and discussion following is not artificial; it is as real as that which occurs elsewhere.

This is particularly true of a topic like leadership, at the very heart of which are social interaction, definition of purpose, accomplishment of task and evaluation of results. Such ingredients are as much in evidence in the room participants are meeting in as in their workplaces. There may, in actuality, be more potential for solid learning from the "here-and-now," in contrast to the "home base," remote as the latter is in the heat of the moment.

Conclusion

This article focuses on essential aspects of leadership development, which at the core is about teaching leadership. It recounts four dimensions of leadership development and fixes on the central one, content and methodology. It then uncovers several major operating assumptions that prevail in the current literature. Rather than serving as a useful guide to effective practice, these assumptions can mislead practitioners in significant ways. The costs of being misled here are high, both in terms of effectiveness and monetary outlay.

Having lain bare central deficiencies apparent in the present thinking about leadership development, the article advances a different way of conceptualizing it. This approach capitalizes on the promise that exists in present initiatives, such as group experiential learning; yet at the same time avoids pitfalls, such as overly elaborate experiences whose effects are weak for the expense incurred.

In the end it points the way to more leadership learning for less experience, rather than the reverse.

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