The evaluation of two key leadership development program components: Leadership skills assessment and leadership mentoring

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated two key components in leadership development programs: a 360-degree assessment of leadership skills and leadership mentoring. The participants in this study include 303 individuals in a leadership development program and 41 leadership mentors. The methodology and underlying rationale for using the two methods selected to evaluate the program are described. The results illustrate the degree to which mentees open up when mentors focus more on coaching and less on compliance and when mentors initiate personal contact with the mentees more often. The results also indicate that self-reports and observer-reports are statistically significantly different from one another. Implications and limitations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Formal leadership training is prevalent in business administration, education administration, and public administration as well as many other disciplines. Researchers argue that leadership performance can be enhanced through formal leadership programs (Bolton, 1991; Earnest, 1996; Rohs, 1999). The benefits of leadership development training include: enhanced leadership skills, increased confidence, broadened perspectives, and increased communication skills (Kincaid & Knop, 1992; Rohs & Langone, 1993; Williams, 1981). However, implementing such training programs can be extremely challenging (Messmer, 2003). Leadership training programs should be realistic, practical, provide an opportunity for growth, and should provide new knowledge to participants all while facing the reality that people come into the program with diverse skills, learning styles, and experiences. Because of these challenges, it is essential that more time is spent on evaluating the methodologies of such programs than has in the past. Rohs (1999) suggests that the accurate evaluation of program methodologies should be a critical area of concern for social scientists and educators.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate two key components of leadership development programs: a 360-degree assessment of leadership skills and mentoring leaders. These two components were chosen over other components because they are frequently found even when leadership training programs have varying curricula, timing, delivery methods, participant demographics, and program size. A leadership skills assessment is critical to any leadership program as a way to gauge current leadership strength and growth as a result of the program. A leadership skills assessment allows program participants to receive feedback regarding where they stand on leadership skills and abilities. This paper presents an examination of the value of using 360-degree leadership assessments by determining if there are statistical differences between self-reports and observer-reports and discussing the implications of differences in terms of program evaluation. Mentoring, although not as common in leadership programs as skills assessment, is a commonly used method for getting people to improve as leaders and understand their strengths and weaknesses by opening up to their mentors' advice and expertise. This is especially true if the mentors have had prior success as leaders in the same field as the program participants. The goal of mentoring is often to provide a vehicle of interaction and communication that furthers the mentee's understanding of the program objectives. This paper presents a methodology for examining the mentor–mentee relationship and shares the findings from an application of the method.

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1.1. 360-degree assessment of leadership skills

Advancements in the social sciences' theoretical perspectives are largely dependent on the empirical evaluation of these theories; however, there is continuous concern about the accuracy of measurement in organizational research (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). Donaldson and Grant-Vallone argue that "accurate measurement of organizational behavior is essential for advancing the field" (p. 246). However, measurement is one of the main concerns of organizational behavior research mainly due to the fact that a large portion of empirical studies use self-reports because they are relatively easier to obtain (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). One of the major weaknesses of evaluations of leadership development programs is the exclusive use of self-reported assessments. As argued by Rohs (1999), "many evaluation studies of leadership development programs have employed some form of introspective self-report measure" (p. 28). Over-reliance on self-reports is considered problematic since self-reports are prone to many kinds of response bias (Schwartz, 1999; Mabe & West, 1982). Moorman and Podsakoff (1992) found that self-report biases occur because individuals have a desire to look socially favorable. Donaldson and Grant-Vallone (2002) summarize the main concern of self-report bias:

> In general, research participants want to respond in a way that makes them look as good as possible. Thus, they tend to under-report behaviors deemed inappropriate by researchers or other observers, and they tend to over-report behaviors viewed as appropriate. Self-report bias is particularly likely in organizational behavior research because employees often believe that there is at least a remote possibility that their employer could gain access to their responses. (p. 247)

For these reasons, some leadership development programs have taken leadership assessment to the next level by extending the evaluation to observers of the individuals' leadership behaviors to provide a 360-degree assessment. 360-degree assessments capture not only the individuals' perspective on their own leadership skills (and changes therein), but they also capture the perspectives of coworkers. One assumption behind 360-degree assessments is that the individual perceptions are likely to be different than the coworkers' perceptions and these discrepancies provide the leader with valuable feedback. Atwater and Waldman (1998) argued that 360-degree assessments were one of the most notable innovations in management in the 1990s. 360-degree assessments are increasingly becoming popular within organizations as a component of performance evaluation (Fletcher, 2001). Evaluations of leadership development programs can also use 360-degree assessments to assess leader changes and thus provide evidence about program effectiveness.

Conger and Toegel (2003) argue that 360-degree assessments work best for developmental purposes as long as the competencies being measured align with the competencies needed to be successful in the individual's organization. 360-degree assessments conducted as part of leadership development programs offer individuals valuable feedback that facilitates skill acquisition, setting developmental goals, and potential behavior change (Bailey & Austin, 2006). More importantly, 360-degree assessments have a methodological advantage over self-reports because data are gathered from multiple sources, and thus perspectives can be triangulated. The data that 360-degree assessments gather from peers, subordinates, and others provide leaders with more self-awareness regarding how they are perceived in the workplace and how their behavior may have changed as a result of a leadership development program. It is possible that ratings provided by observers are likely to be different than the self-report scores (Fleenor, McCauley, & Brutus, 1996; Tomow, 1993). Further, peer and supervisor reports have been suggested to be more accurate than self-reports (Borman, 1991; Harris & Schaubroeck 1988; Van Velsor, Taylor, & Leslie, 1993). Donaldson and Grant-Vallone (2002) suggest that there should be at least two data sources to help minimize the validity threats of self-report bias. In this paper I examine the value of 360-degree assessment for evaluation purposes, in part, by determining if leaders' self-reports are actually statistically different than the reports completed by observers. 360-degree assessments not only offer valuable feedback to the participants, they represent a more rigorous methodology for the evaluation of leadership development programs than self-report only data by gathering data from multiple sources. However, in order to be an effective evaluation tool, evaluators must understand whether and how self-ratings are likely to differ from observer-ratings. Given this assumption, the following is hypothesized.

Hypothesis 1. Leadership skills self-report assessments will be statistically different from leadership skills observer-report assessments. Specifically, leadership skills self-report assessments will be higher than leadership skills observer-report assessments.

1.2. Mentoring

Mentoring is defined as the matching of a novice with a more experienced person in the same role (Reiss, 2007). Formal mentoring can significantly enhance the development of mentees (Tracey & Nicholl, 2007). Mentoring theorists suggest that mentoring is a complex relationship based on a social exchange between at least two individuals (Boyer, 2003). One purpose of mentors is to help their mentees be more comfortable and secure in their roles as leaders (Reiss, 2007). Mentorship is assumed to foster teamwork, motivation, and help increase competency levels of mentees when incorporated into leadership development programs and organizational systems (Messmer, 2003). In addition, theorists argue that the mentor–mentee relationship is the most developmentally important relationship in an individual's professional life (Zaleznik, 1977). However, there is very little quantitative research on mentoring outcomes (Tracey & Nicholl, 2007). In this paper, I offer an approach for investigating the mentor–mentee relationship.