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Beyond a One-size Fits All Approach to
Designing Interventions

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SEASONS OF A LEADER'S DEVELOPMENT: BEYOND A ONE-SIZE FITS ALL APPROACH TO DESIGNING INTERVENTIONS [1]

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we propose a typology of leadership development methods. We argue that different methods are suited to the learning needs of different leaders, which we segment by organizational level, life-cycle and role-cycle. We advance propositions about which learning methods are best suited to the challenges of these different seasons of a leader's development.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, enormous research attention has been devoted to the theory and practice of leadership development (LD) (e.g. Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1999; Parks, 2005). While there is general agreement that different managerial populations need different kinds of learning opportunities, there is little guidance currently provided to help LD practitioners select among and combine methods such that they are best suited to the needs of their targets.

We define leadership as a set of behaviours that are different from management behaviours and may be exercised at any formal level (e.g. Kotter, 1990). We also recognize, however, that the skills needed to lead a team for the first time are different from those needed to lead an entire business unit or an enterprise comprised of multiple business units; therefore, we take into account the level of leadership expertise or positioning within the relevant organization's leadership pipeline (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2001). Movement through this leadership pipeline is often correlated, although not perfectly, with advancement along the lifecycle; as such, we also consider stages of adult development that profoundly influence a person's professional development agenda (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1978). Finally, a long tradition of research that has explored the challenges of taking charge in, or making the transition to, a new leadership role (Gabarro, 2007; Hill, 1992; McCall, 2004) suggests that movement into a new role is qualitatively different than improving one's game within a current role.

In this article we review the state of the art in leadership development methods with an eye towards helping LD practitioners better understand the unique development challenges faced by leaders in different situations and at different stages of development. We begin by proposing a typology of available LD methodologies, noting the "one size fits all" assumption present in the current literature (see Lord & Hall, 2005; Mumford, Marks, Shane Connelly, Zaccaro, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000, for notable exceptions). Next, we review theory and research suggesting different learning needs over the leadership life-cycle and apply these to our LD typology so as to inform guide decisions about which methods are most appropriate for different leaders.

A CLASSIFICATION OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING METHODS

Although there is little agreement about the best strategies for developing leaders (Hackman & Wageman, 2007), there has been an increasing recognition that leadership development must incorporate a constellation of practices in order to be effective (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004, Mumford et al., 2000). We propose a classification of

LD methods built on two dimensions: locus of learning (out-of-context and in-context learning methods) and what one learns (*role*, *self-in-role* and *self* learning methods).

In/out-of-context: Where do leaders learn?

Leadership methods can be categorized according to where the learning takes place: in- and out-of context methods (e.g. Vicere, 1998). One of the most significant advances within the field of executive development has been the increasing focus on in-context methods (Boud & Garrik, 1999; Vicere, 1998), that is motivated by the strong desire on part of companies to ensure transfer of learning from the classroom to the workplace and to see a tangible return their investments in education (Conger & Toegel, 2003). But, the focus in executive education for specific in-company and customized programs has been balanced with a recognition of the need of open-enrolment programs that bring together participants coming from different functions, organizations, industries and cultures (Harrison, Leitch, & Chia., 2007). A compelling argument for out-of-context methods is built on notions of psychological safety and exposure to outside influences or new perspectives (Harrison et al., 2007; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). The rise of external coaching as popular leadership development method is testament to the importance of taking a step back from the daily reality of the corporate world in order to gain perspective and enhance renewal (Conger & Toegel, 2003).

Role/Self-in-Role/Self: What is being learned and how is it learned?

Across the countless dimensions that have been used to differentiate types of knowledge acquired and ways of learning (e.g. Argyris & Schön, 1978; Ausubel, 1968; Clark, 1992; Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1976), one may discern several pertinent continua, for example, from general knowledge that is applicable to many and can be acquired cognitively to highly personal self or team knowledge that can only be acquired by reflection and self-examination; from methods that require less to more active participation and/or grounded experience by the learner; and, from first to second order learning, in which premises and basic assumptions come into question. In an attempt to summarize across these multiple, but related dimensions, we suggest three kinds of learning: *role, self-in-role* and *self* learning experiences.

Role learning is concerned with the specific content and context of a leadership role, which may vary broadly across function and organization, and occurs primarily by understanding and assimilating concepts (Ausubel, 1968). *Self-in-role learning* is socially situated learning; a basic assumption is that direct experience in role is required in order to internalize a leader identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lord & Hall, 2005). *Self learning* is personal, often extending beyond the realm of the immediate job to broader issues of career and life goals and interpersonal relations. By contrast to learning from direct experience, personal learning requires people to reflect critically on underlying assumptions associated with the knowledge frames and decision premises that they are using to make sense (and potentially question) of their actions and those of their organization (Schwandt, 2005).

In-context role learning methods include job shadowing, role modelling and leaders as teachers. Among *out-of-context role learning* practices are computer-mediated learning, classroom learning, case methods and skill-building exercises. *In-context self-in-role* methods are job assignments, job rotation and action learning. Within the o*ut-of-context self-in-role* methods, we find simulations and outdoor

challenges. *In-context self learning* methods include mentoring or internal coaching and 360 feedback. Finally, included in *self learning out-of-context* practices are external coaching, networking, and methods such as service learning, consciousness raising and transformational executive development programs.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS AT DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS, LIFE-CYCLE AND ROLE STAGES

LD scholars agree that leadership occurs at all levels of an organization's hierarchy (e.g., Charan et al., 2001; Lord & Hall, 2005; Mumford et al., 2000) and that leadership development is a life-long process of human development (e.g. Kegan, 1982; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Life-long learning, in turn, implies that different skills, values, priorities and basic assumptions guide people's approaches to leadership at different moments of their professional life (Charan et al., 2001). Accordingly, we explore below three aspects of a leader's evolution, which may suggest different development needs: (1) the *level* of leadership, which may vary from a small team to enterprise-wide leadership, (2) the *life-cycle stage* of the leader, and, (3) *role-cycle stage*, i.e., where they find themselves relative to a specific role entry or exit.

Development Needs by Organizational Level

A solid stream of research suggests that there are qualitative as well as quantitative skill changes required in the transition from novice to middle to senior leadership levels (e.g. Anderson, 1987; Eriksson & Charness, 1994; Glaser & Chi, 1998; Lord & Hall, 2005). Among the biggest challenges for *novice managers* are learning to value the managerial job and shifting from doing the work to getting work done through others (Charan et al., 2001; Hill, 1992). Novices need to understand how to produce leadership behaviour and observational learning may be important (Gibson, 2003; Lord & Hall, 2005). In this sense, *in-context* role methods, such as job-shadowing or role models, may help novices to overcome gaps in understanding and performance (Harrison et al., 2007) as they immerse themselves in classic on-the-job training (*self-in role, in context*). In addition to on-the-job practice, novice leaders need to increase their understanding by consolidating concepts that are related to their job duties (Mintzberg, 2004) and by acquiring theories and heuristics to represent broader leadership issues (Lord & Hall, 2005). *Out-of-context role learning* methods, such as classroom learning and e-learning, therefore, are a critical complement to learning by doing.

The biggest challenge for *middle managers* is developing a point of view beyond their immediate function or group and, in concert, identifying and managing an extended set of stakeholders (Charan et al., 2001; Kotter, 1985). Core skills for middle leaders shift from the technical to the human, and therefore, relational domain (Katz, 1974); as such *self-in-role and self learning* methods that extend their perspective to the external world and to the self – simulations, 360º feedback instruments and networking – may be more adequate at a mid-career stage than the situated methods best suited for novices.

Finally, at senior levels managers are faced with challenges of increasing scope, complexity and ambiguity (Howard, 2007). The transition into *senior management* entails a shift from looking at plans and proposals functionally to gaining a business-wide perspective and long-term view (Charan et al., 2001)

Accordingly, senior executives must supplement their human skills with conceptual skills needed to coordinate and integrate all the organization's activities towards a common vision or objective (Katz, 1974). However, many senior leaders may still experience doubts and anxiety about non-technical abilities such as the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Scase & Goffee, 1989). While in-context methods are invaluable for novices, the risk for more senior leaders is becoming stuck in mindsets or operating styles that have worked for them in the past but may no longer fit them or their context (Houde, 2007). Among self-learning practices, service learning, consciousness raising or transformational executive development programs allow time for reflection and analysis, as well as encourage examination of basic premises (e.g., Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007).

Development Needs by Life-Cycle

Adult development processes impact work life significantly. A variety of stage-based models (e.g. Sheehy, 1976; Levinson, 1978; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Super, 1963) suggest changes in work motives and work/life priorities across the life-cycle (Hall, 1996; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). More broadly, leadership development is increasingly seen as adult development (e.g. Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009).

During *early adulthood* managers are primarily focused on achieving and delivering (e.g. Levinson, 1978). Career satisfaction is at the highest point at this stage (Rush, Peacock, & Milkovich, 1980) and well-being during this period is strongly dependent on the social structure in which the person is embedded. Dominant goals are to advance in the enterprise, to climb the ladder and become a senior member of that world (Levinson, 1978). LD methods that enhance performance will serve as powerful motivational forces (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). For this purpose in-context *self-in-role learning* methods such as job assignments, job rotation or action learning may serve to polish job related skills.

The *midlife stage* has been characterized as a period of evaluation (Levinson, 1978; Scase & Goffee, 1989). It is the period in the lifespan characterized by the most complex interplay of multiple roles, but identity appears to be still largely defined by work (Lachman, 2004). According to Hermans & Oles (1999), the midlife transition is accompanied by three features: (1) a recognition that what was satisfactory until now has been inadequate; (2) a change of time perspective and a reevaluation of personal goals; and, (3) a reinterpretation of the future, with special emphasis of making things happen. Rush et al. (1980) found that during midlife work satisfaction drops dramatically, but it does not change the willingness to exert effort or make personal sacrifices on behalf of the job or career. LD methods that emphasize real-life learning through confronting job demands with new perspectives, such as simulations and outdoor challenges, and methods that involve the creation of a learning community that helps participants question their goals and priorities are useful at this moment, for example, group coaching, 360 degree feedback and networking. Mid-life learners may especially benefit from multi-module programs spread out over a relatively long period of time, which give the learner a chance to tie the educational to the work experience (Mintzberg, 2004).

In *late adulthood* the strength of achievement motives, extrinsic values and openness to experience wane and intrinsic values concerning self-acceptance, authenticity, emotional intimacy and community contribution become more salient (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). *Late adults* strive to enhance and affirm their self-concept (Gibson, 2003) and are relatively less attracted by higher levels of job performance

(Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). From an organizational perspective, the most effective motivational intervention for late adulthood leaders may be those that target the utilization and distribution of the relevant knowledge and experience they possess (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Regarding LD practices, being a mentor or a coach of younger people may particularly benefit late adults' work motivation (Drucker, 1994). Alternatively, service learning, which entails participation in community-based projects and aims to raise awareness by exposing participants to societal issues of which they would otherwise be unaware may help late adults explore ways they might make a difference as leaders in their societies (Steiner and Watson, 2006). As Mirvis (2008:175) argues, these "consciousness raising experiences" can deepen awareness of one's sense of self, provided that experience includes time and space for 'inner work.'

Development Needs by Role Stage

Vertical and horizontal movements in an organization form part of what Jennings (1965:66) termed "a continual process of arriving, departing and arriving." Managers must disengage from a previous role, enter a new role and disengage again (Ibarra, 2003; Jennings, 1965; Scase & Goffee, 1989; Huy, 2002; Argyris, 1990). Socialization researchers have long explored these processes, spanning anticipatory socialization, entry into the new role (i.e., taking charge), and subsequent passage through informal inclusion boundaries (Schein, 1985). Building on the literature on both life and role-cycle transitions (e.g. Ashforth, 2001; Gabarro, 2007; Levinson, 1978), we suggest that LD interventions must also take into account whether the person is in a transitional or stable period vis-à-vis the role.

Transitional periods are typically emotionally wrought as leaders anticipate and explore the potential fit between self and the anticipated or new role (Ibarra, 1999; Hill, 1992). One of the biggest challenges faced in role transitions is *letting go*, or unlearning, because leaders often have difficulty giving up what makes them successful in the past (Houde, 2007; Harrison et al., 2007; McCall, 2004). Further, learning is happening in real time: *taking charge* of a new role implies action accompanied by continuous analyses, corrections, evaluations and refinements (Gabarro, 2007). While in-context methods such as mentoring and 360 feedback may accelerate the sense-making process of integrating new work experience into a coherent self-picture (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994), their benefits must be weighed against *out of context methods* that help people make sense of the changes they are experiencing by social comparison within a peer group facing a similar transition.

In *stable or consolidation periods, by contrast,* people seek to deepen role-related skills, or alternatively, to take advantage of their experience in-role to broaden their repertoires or shore up weaknesses. Leaders may benefit from learning experiences in unfamiliar contexts to solve familiar problems or situations (Houde, 2007). S*elf-in-role* learning methods, such as simulations and outdoor challenges may help leaders to reshape and evaluate situations parallel to the ones they are facing in their work contexts, and methods that enhance reflection, such as case discussions may serve to reframe and enrich their analysis of work-related issues. For leaders who expect to spend long periods of time without making a formal role transition, interventions aimed at self-renewal, combating obsolescence and infusing routine activities with new meaning may yield the highest payoffs. Coaching, networking, service learning, consciousness raising and transformational programs may be valuable for these purposes.

CONCLUSION

Pedagogies used in leadership interventions cannot be generalized to all leaders, simply cutting-and-pasting them from one population to the other. Methods must be in sync with both job demands and individuals' needs at a particular time and place. This article argued that different leadership development learning methods will be suited for the different needs and issues faced by leaders at different level, life and role stages and proposed a typology of available LD methods that help designers and learners make their choices.

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