

Leadership Development: Are we Meeting the Demands of Business Complexity?

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Abstract

Leadership development, and its alignment with the requirements of business operations in an increasingly complex environment, requires the integration of developmental programs to strategic business objectives. The questions become: Are organizational leadership development practices meeting the demands of business complexity? Additionally, what is the relationship amongst the required technical expertise, people skills, and organizational leadership practices, and are the current development practices meeting the demands of the complexity of this triad in a for-profit business environment? The research shows that there is a strong attempt to identify leadership traits and theories; however, there is limited qualitative and quantitative research supporting a roadmap for connecting the importance of leadership skills to project success and the strategic growth of an organization.

Introduction

This paper explores the challenges of leadership development and its relationship to increased complexity and demands of business operations. It provides an introduction to leadership characteristics and conditions; the HR considerations for leadership program content; the debates and perspectives of the current researchers and experts in the exploration of leadership; and, examines the current state of the art in research and practice.

Good leaders are in demand with the growing complexity of business environments. Many organizations, to stay competitive, must go beyond their domestic markets and expand into global markets, so as a result, a balance of technical expertise and the ability to interface in a multifaceted environment becomes even more important when expanding into the unknown arenas. Taking into account cultural differences for business operations, and the additional expectations of its managers and leaders have an impact on the ability to identify the desired leadership skills and traits needed to expand an organization's customer base. Considering global business expansion and the discussion of what leadership skills are needed to be more effective, is a relatively new research field (Jenkins, 2012, p.95). Although global business and commerce are not new, exploring the connection between the business "personalities" and the current training and development practices—what is being taught or trained within training departments or delivered by training business vendors—meeting the requirements to effectively and accurately train and develop future business leaders?

Traditionally the training department is housed within the Human Resource (HR) organizational structure. HR typically influences the content for leadership development

programs with the business managing the technical and business strategy training—with limited overlap. The HR focus on leadership development concentrates on the HR-related people-skills such as progressive discipline, constructive feedback, performance evaluations or team building. They rarely integrate leadership development with business training such as strategies and business development organic or internal growth, cultural etiquette for business or other non-standard HR areas that ultimately would help managers within the dynamic work environment.

Examining leadership for business success is not a new concept; there are many researchers looking at what constitutes leadership characteristics. Nixon, Harrington and Parker (2011) completed a study on leadership performance and project success and determined that leadership training should be prioritized to improve outcome. They stated, "...no single leadership model is appropriate throughout the duration of the project" (Nixon et al., p. 204) and that it was "important to understand the differences between project management and project leadership" (Nixon et al., p. 208). In many cases, business units within organizations are responsible for training their project managers so as a result focus on the tactical aspects of that position, such as scope, schedule, cost, risk, and quality management. When discussing leadership development, there seems to be an imbalance of integrating the skills needed to lead teams better to expand their market base (external facing leadership controlled by the business units) and skills needed to effectively manage their teams (internal facing leadership controlled by the HR departments). For training departments to create programs to assist in developing leaders in a complex environment, and to grow their leaders to align to corporate business growth strategies, shouldn't there be more integration with strategic initiatives and leadership skills that address business operations? Are their budget constraints impeding this focus or simply a lack of understanding of its business value?

What is interesting is the lack of integration of the developmental triad, namely, strategic leadership skills training, the strategic business goals and tactical training, and people-skills training addressed by HR owners of training departments. Much of the research regarding defining, qualifying and quantifying leadership dwells on the psychology of leadership, thus the HR focus. For example, Hoption, Barling, and Turner (2013) include areas such as a person's communication style and the impact of humor. Other characteristic according to de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, and Oostenveld (2010) and Nichols (2014) include a person's leadership style which can be charismatic, or human-, task- or relationship-oriented. Additionally, Dabke (2016) and Feldman and Mulle (2007) identify the role of emotional intelligence (EI) on leader effectiveness. All of these areas support the HR focus for the content of their leadership programs which is on behavioral characteristics rather than incorporating both behavioral and leading with business objectives in mind.

Debates and Perspectives

There is a great deal of research in the area of leadership and the psychology behind the makeup of a leader, the different characteristics, methodologies of operating, and the emotional intelligence of those in leadership positions. A study by Dabke (2016) examined "emotional intelligence and transformational behavior on perceived leadership effectiveness" (Dabke, p. 27) and another study by de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, and Oostenveld (2010) examined the relationship of a leader's communication style to their leadership style (de Vries et al., p.367). Nichols (2015), Chen (2008), and Eacott (2010) examined what traits people looked for in their leaders, and Lee and Liu (2011) examined leader versus leadership traits needed to work effectively in a

global environment. In the area of project management and leadership Schoemaker (cited in Rivera-Ruiz and Ferrer-Moreno, 2015) identified a study where 20,000 executives identified six skills necessary for strategic project leadership. These are but a sampling of the many studies completed but there are few completed that directly address the perspective of bridging the business strategies and technical skills that are needed to address stakeholder and stockholder expectations, with the leader characteristics of working with people to accomplish those tasks. However, the industry is not completely unaware as illustrated by the Project Management Institute ® separating their communication knowledge areas into two segments: communications, and stakeholder management.

There are many notable and successful business leaders. For example, Lee Iacocca who's globally recognized business style in the 1960's brought Ford and then in the 1980's Chrysler Corporation into market dominance. We, as scholars, should look not only at what other scholars are researching in this area, but also look at successful practitioners and their views on leadership to give insight into the practical or operational side. Although not a scientific study Iacocca (2007) identified nine characteristics that he thought made up a leader: curiosity, creativity, courage, conviction, charisma, honest communication, character, competence, and lastly, common sense (pp. 6-10). He was a leader in his field, an exceptional Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and well-documented business skills; however, what (if any) special leadership traits were dominant? What did Iacocca do that was different and did he motivate employees to excel or was he more of a task-oriented leader with a minimal focus on the people that worked for him?

Terminology

There are various leadership definitions and terminologies for leadership characteristics or points of research. Leadership Psychology as defined by Chen (2008) wants to control localized problem solving, views power as property that can be influenced and “pursues timeless universals to solve current problems, setting the eyes of the future” (p. 551). Discursive leadership per Chen (2008) “problematizes the situation at the macro level” and views power as “encompassing and ubiquitous follows its constructivist stand with a focus on context and discourse” (p. 551).

Manager versus leader. There is some discussion on the difference between a good manager and a good leader, but at a macro level, these labels are fundamentally a difference of perspective in job expectations. The manager focuses on the current job deliverables, and the leader is looking at longer term objectives (Kotterman, 2006, p. 15). The manager plans and budgets, and the leader sets the direction and develops the vision. The manager displays low emotion, and the leader is motivated and displays high emotions. The manager takes the low-risk approach, and the leader takes high-risk approach. The manager manages vision order and predictability, and the leader promotes useful and dramatic changes (Kotterman, p. 15).

Edwards and Schedlitzki (2014) considered the manager-leader debate as a “differing assumptions about power” and developed a 4-quadrant model: 1) managers doing leadership, 2) managers becoming leaders, 3) being managers and leaders, and 4) leaders doing management (p. 332). What Edwards and Schedlitzki discovered was that most of the literature debate “regarding the similarities and differences between leadership and management resided in Quadrant 1” (p. 336). The focus on “managers doing leadership’ has an important implication for course developers in corporate and vendor training. Research now indicates that there is a “growth in interest in distributed leadership” with a move “away from the perspective of

researching managers “doing” leadership” (p. 333). As a result, potentially the corporate leadership programs are not preparing people to move into more strategic roles and effectively handle a more complex business environment.

The definition of leaders is varied, but this is viewed as a person who is “responsible for directing the actions of other towards a shared goal” (Nichols, 2016, p. 661). However Bass (cited in Kotterman 2006) “believes that the legitimacy of a leader depends on the acceptance of his/her subordinates” (p. 14). Kotterman (2006) states that there are problems attempting to define leadership due to an absence of classifications and a unifying theory of leadership (p. 13). Leadership was defined by Feldman and Mulle (2007) as the ability to influence and whose qualities consisted of “vision, values, honor, loyalty, love, trust, friendship, truth, wisdom, heroism and faith” (pp. 123-124). As the literature conveys, defining the leader characteristics is a challenge.

Emotional Intelligence (EI). The role of EI, or Emotional Quotient (EQ), is highly debated on its value regarding the impact on leadership capabilities and preparedness. Daniel Goleman (1998) cited in Feldman and Mulle (2007) stated the research of over 200 large companies revealed that EI was twice as important as ability and technical skills to measure how successful a person might be (p. 3). Opposing views, such as Dabke (2016) indicate that the “EI of the leader failed to emerge as a predictor of perceived effectiveness” (p. 27). However, although Dabke’s findings may disagree with Goleman, there is still value in exploring and researching the EI value. Research has indicated that people with higher EI are more efficient at reading body language, picking up emotional cues, are better empathic listeners and can more effectively regulate their emotions (Dabke, p. 28).

Desirable Traits

Researchers have found numerous desirable traits for leaders; however, this is difficult to quantify since “different people expect different qualities in their leaders” (Nichols, 2016, p. 660). Dominance and cooperation have been primary areas of research with many theories depending on this dichotomy (Nichols, p. 659). Both the dominance “as having influence in social context” and cooperative traits “the extent a party will pursue mutually compatible interests” (Nichols, p. 661) were in the context of the person’s experience and the extent to which the participants in the study valued these traits in an individual. Nichols studied the characteristics of dominance-related traits which consisted of task-oriented individuals, versus cooperative-related traits which consisted of relationship-oriented individuals and found that the dominance trait was desired more by women than men, but the cooperative trait was balanced between men and women as a desired trait (p. 658). The latter statement also illustrates the complexity of defining leader traits by adding a different dimension not previously mentioned, namely, the characteristics between men and women.

Nichols (2016) found that experience into itself is not an indicator of success in a leader but rather the type of experience, the longevity, and relevance of the experience played a greater role in the determination of whether individuals view those as good leaders (p. 661). Research into leadership traits has also shifted focus from typical leader characteristics to ideal leader characteristics, and current research has found that if asked about their standards of an ideal leader, participants the latter characteristics being better predictors of the organizational outcome (Nichols, 2016, p. 659). The combination of experience and the shift from typical versus ideal leader-skills makes studying leadership skills difficult to chart.

It is a matter of perspective regarding how the difference between managers and leaders are perceived and what constitutes leadership qualities. Some researcher such as de Vries et al. (2009) view communication or operational styles as an internal characteristic of leader qualities that manifest themselves by the person's actions (p. 376). Others such as Lee, Liu and Chia (2011) cited Harold Genee as stating that "leadership cannot be taught, it can only be learned" (p. 4). It is a topic that is very broad with many options for research. As a result, many of the articles address only specific aspects of leader-manager behaviors and characteristics in the business world.

Perspective of the literature

Much of the literature and studies cover very specific aspects of defining a leader or those with leadership qualities. As a result, it is difficult to provide a simple statement that summarizes leaders in a business environment without extensive research from both the social science and the business areas. For example, Chen (2008) discusses discursive leadership and leadership psychology stating that ontologically discursive leadership is constructionism and leadership psychology realism; whereas from an epistemologically viewpoint discursive is construction and leadership is "internal representation of external reality" (p. 548). It is encouraging to discover that the issues of differentiating leaders, leadership and management are not new to researchers. Because of the vastness of the subject, researchers typically have chosen specific aspects of explaining these characteristics to provide some clarity in the discussion. However, this does not fully answer the question of what the specific differences are, are we meeting those needs, or how we can better meet those needs in a complex environment.

State of Art Research

As noted there are numerous books and studies that specifically focus on leadership traits and characteristics, but lesser on the comparisons between leadership and management or leadership in an international setting. Without this depth of research which training departments and training businesses can use to provide input into the creation of leadership programs, it is difficult to address and align programs to the complexity of the business environment. As Dabke (2016) suggested, there still lacks a common understanding and definition amongst researchers to identify what is needed to make a leader effective (p. 30).

Common theories include Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT), Multifactor Leadership Theory/Questionnaire (MLT/MLQ) with some discussion on the Leadership Quotient (LQ) and Adaptive Organization Structure (AOS) (Kivipõld and Vadi, 2009; Hargis, Watt and Piotrowski, 2011; Nichols, 2016; Dabke, 2016; deVries, Bakker-Pieper and Oostenveld, 2009; Hopton, Barling and Turner, 2013). Regarding the MLT which tends to be the dominant theory, within the three areas of focus—transformational leadership, transactional leadership and non-leadership or laissez-faire leadership—the primary field of interest is in transformational leadership characteristics.

However, in the study by Hargis (2011), his results showed that "transformational leadership behaviors are important to team cohesion, team potency and leader effectiveness" (p. 60). There are many factors that influence a definition, but there are some that are now including the personalities of the individuals and their background that may dictate their ability to engage in genuine leadership (Hartman, 2007, p. 32). Additionally, Gray (2007) expressed that additional studies need to be completed to expand their exploration into leadership characteristics

across various countries to include cultural differences in the areas of the self-deception and impression management (p. 576). Reading Dabke, Hargis, Hartman and Gray (amongst others) it becomes apparent that there is no clear definition for a starting point for research into leadership in a complex environment. Leadership is a combination of many things including personal awareness, experience, personality, training, and “basic luck or chance” (Hartman et al., 2007, p. 38). It appears as the adage goes, one must simply put a stake in the ground—examine a theory, behavior or organizational situation—and begin.

Lee et al. (2011) viewed the terms leadership and leaders as separate entities. According to Lee “leadership cannot be separated from the person of leaders and the task of leadership...[and] is the interaction between the leader’s characteristics and the situation” (p. 5). Also acknowledged was that, although there are designated leaders, it does not mean they have leadership abilities nor can lead (Lee et al., p. 5). This distinction creates a dichotomy between the practical definition with the behavioral definition.

One of the latest studies completed by Dabke (2016) on EI revealed interesting results that contradict the practitioner's view. As a practitioner, there has been articles and books published on emotional intelligence and how having a lower EQ was one of the primary reasons leaders fail and traditional leadership training programs were not resulting in a cadre of effective leaders. To remedy this omission, the intent of training organizations has been to incorporate EI training into their programs to ensure corporate managers and leaders are aware of themselves so they can then become better managers but more importantly, better leaders. However, according to Dabke EI had very little relevance as an indicator of leader effectiveness (p. 27) should you increase a person’s EI. Dabke instead discovered that transformational leadership was a better indicator of success than EI. Bass (1985) cited in Dabke (2016) indicated that “a transformational leader actively seeks to change personal values among the followers...for the good of larger entities” (p. 29).

Another study completed by Edwards and Schedlitzki (2014) examined the leadership and management debate amongst researcher but examining power assumptions (p. 328). Throughout their research, they found that attempting to define leadership and management were very difficult due to the varying or vague descriptions by other researchers. Some used the terms interchangeably (Edwards et al., 2015, p. 331) and the research to date did not clarify the terms to offer understanding regarding the similarities and differences (p. 330). Lastly, they examined how power influenced leaders and tried to identify some power sources such as networks, knowledge and information, control of technology and truth (Edwards et al., p. 330).

Findings from the literature

In the area of the social science research on leadership, there are both qualitative, such as the study by Nixon et al. (2012) regarding leadership performance, and quantitative studies, such as the study by Hoption et al. (2013) on self-deprecating humor and transformation leadership. Studies in the social science area tend to focus on behavioral characteristics of leadership and management with some discussion on defining leaders. With regards to determining the leadership skills needed to meet the needs of business in a complex environment, more research would be needed in the business area to fully understand the potential gap in what training departments and other training organizations are delivering concerning leadership development content.

When examining how to prepare better individuals who are not only in existing leadership roles but who are transiting from a tactical or business operations position into more

strategic roles, leadership development becomes important when considering complex environments. Training leaders must integrate with the business goals and as a result “an optimal training organization assimilates with the business in which it operates” (Beery, 2011, p. 11). This integration of training content and business goals becomes critical when developing leaders to meet the needs of business operations.

State of the Art Practice

For years many training organizations have provided leadership training and development, but there is not an overabundance of exceptional leaders, partly due of the traditional nature of most training departments. Additionally, training departments usually have limited budgets, are controlled by the more HR-related need to educate managers to ensure they are not breaking any employee rights, and have the added focus on ethics training to provide proof to the stockholder, stakeholders, and government agencies that the organization is well versed in ethical behavior. Laws and ethics are important; however, mentors rather than the formal development play an important part in the development of future leaders to ensure the skills acquired align both with the company objectives and the job requirements (Hicks, 2011).

In for-profit business the goal is to make a profit, to make the stockholders happy, and to encourage more people to invest in their organization. In a large organization the stockholders hold more power; in smaller organizations, the owners determine how to spend available discretionary funds and resource training positions. As a result, training dollars shrink and training programs—especially programs considered non-essential—are eliminated.

The current research seems to be keenly interested in attempting to explain the difference amongst leadership, the skills required, what it means to be a leader, and what management comprises. However, since there is no consensus among the scholars on an ultimate definition, from a practitioner’s viewpoint this simply means that the traditional concepts of training still hold value. Changing the structure and content of existing leadership development programs is very much like changing a paradigm; ideas and theories for developing better leader traits may be identified, but until one or more of those ideas or theories can be proven to be better, little changes—except for the addition of more studies.

Patti Phillips, a renowned expert in ROI (Return on Investment) with a focus on the project management and training industries, put the leader development and business value in a different perspective. Businesses know the value of leader development but are not content with their current program since those programs are not providing leader bench strength (Phillips, 2016, p. 46). Since training dollars are housed in a non-capital area, to show value to the business, training departments should consider ROI statistics. However, in Stage 1 of her model which focuses on “who is attending, what topics are explored, and the time allocated to the process” the topics which are explored may be a critical component in effective ROI statistics (Phillips, p. 49). If the topics do not align with the research that shows the characteristics and traits of leaders and managers, the data being captured to produce the ROI may be flawed. Although the process includes data collection, analysis, and reporting, training will still result in poor leaders if the topics are not related to research findings and align to business goals. In other words, if the content of the leadership development program does not contain the skills and leader-traits needed to develop leadership characteristics, then the data collected and analyzed and those who take the training will not accurately obtain the desired business needs or leader traits.

Thomas and Thomas (2011) also reflect on the practical aspects of leader development in that vision is a critical component of leadership. A person moving into a leadership position needs to be able to shift from the tactical world of spreadsheets and performance evaluations to “a product of the mind called imagination” and that “vision is needed as much as a strategy to succeed” (p. 537). As a result, the ability to align vision may be more with the concept of Lee et al., (2011) that leadership only be learned and Hartman (2007) that personalities may be a better indicator of genuine leadership, and this case the capability to be a visionary. In addition, there is a greater acceptance of individual coaching and mentoring in the industry so this, in addition to formal training will help develop the desired leadership traits (Thomas and Thomas, p. 538).

Conclusion

The combination of skills, personality characteristics, leader characteristics, vision, and strategic alignment amongst others is a complex challenge for training groups to develop leaders that better meet the needs of a complex business environment. External and internal constraints on training departments such as restricted training budgets and government mandated training can be a challenge. According to Gray (2007), Dabke (2016) and Nichols (2016) leadership abilities are part perception and the appearance of a great leader in one situation does not mean that person will be a great leader in a different environment. This level of situational customization is part of the quandary when attempting to define leadership skills and develop courses—the perception of good and bad can vary depending on the project or company environment.

The traditional HR functions focus on HR-related employee issues when developing training programs to guide new managers. However, the research uncovered to-date does not intersect the concepts of business strategy implementation with leadership strategies to help business growth. If this concept were diagrammed, it would look like a Venn diagram where one circle’s primary function was business strategy implementation and the second circle leadership strategies with the common area business growth. Although I have not found a research project that examined the level of success between poor leaders or good leaders when implementing business strategies and the level of growth for the organization, this is not saying those studies have not been completed—I just have not found them.

International and management implications

This research has uncovered potential issues of the misalignment of leadership training programs with the leader requirements in the context of leader skills needed to impact business growth and vision in domestic and international markets. Although there are many articles and journal entries that discuss and have researched various leadership behavioral traits and characteristics, there are few papers that discuss the integration of the technical aspects of business operations and strategic growth initiatives with the currently delivered leadership development programs and evaluated their level of success.

Fundamentally, there are discussions on strategic planning, international expansion, tactical implementations and the change management involved with those implementations. There are also discussions on collecting and analyzing data to justify training program, and project management skills from the operations stance. Regarding people-skills, there is research completed on behavioral characteristics but the research falls short—that next step—on how that information can help or align with business operations. In the middle is nirvana. A perfect

course that teaches a person currently in a leadership role (or a person that is emerging from a manager role to a leader role) how to meet the tactical, stockholder, and revenue objectives; which integrates the business profit requirements while being innovative and inspiring to both the people on their teams and those who are peers, superiors or clients. It can be done.

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