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# Power to the People: Where Has Personal Agency Gone in Leadership Development?

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It is true. Organizations routinely get leadership development wrong because of their insatiable hunger for short-term results. Senior executives fail to support leadership development because of the pressure put upon them for performance and deeply held beliefs about hard-wired talent. And lastly, human resources (HR) departments are often helpless because they fail to connect to business processes and lack true decision-making authority, and even when they have it, they focus on developing cumbersome performance management systems and competency models that do more to confuse employees rather than provide a roadmap for future development.

With this in mind, why is it that most recommendations on how to enhance leadership development in organizations focus on the organization, senior management, or HR? Would aligning leadership development with organizational systems and strategies help? Yes. Would changing the way senior management thinks about and engages in leadership development help? Yes. Would implementing smarter HR strategies and processes help? Yes. The

research is clear in this regard. Unfortunately we, and even McCall, have little faith that this will happen—for all of the same reasons that these problems exist in the first place.

We believe the potential for leadership development rests with the people, not the organization, not senior management, and not HR. As McCall (2010) states—“there is no substitute for educating developing leaders on how to take responsibility for their own development.” Unfortunately, we know little about how individuals take responsibility for their own leadership development. Scholars and practitioners need to focus more on enhancing individuals’ ability to learn from their own experiences and less on developing the perfect system to match the right people with the right experience. In this article, we present a process of mindful engagement that delineates what individuals can do proactively to advance their own leadership development.

## **Learning to Lead: A Self-Directed Process of Mindful Engagement**

The reasons individuals do not learn from experience are many. We posit there are at least three aspects of how individuals engage in developmental experiences that predict and explain the learning of leadership. The first is how individuals *approach* and frame the experience. The second is an individual’s *action* and information processing during the experience.

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The third involves how individuals *reflect* on the experience. We believe that this approach–action–reflection framework highlights the processes involved in self-directed leadership development, which can supplement, if not supplant, the organizational focus that is embraced by McCall and most of the existing literature on leadership development.

#### *Approach: You Get What You Expect*

The way people approach and frame an experience affects how they engage in and learn from that experience. This is evident in research on the framing of situations as gains or losses (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984), threats or opportunities (Jackson & Dutton, 1988), and as mastery or performance situations (Dweck, 1986). For example, research on mastery and performance frames suggests that when people frame a task in performance terms, they are more risk averse, less likely to experiment with new ways of doing things, and less willing to persist in the face of challenging, developmental situations, when compared with people who frame the situation as a learning opportunity (Ames & Archer, 1988; Pintrich, 2000). Similar findings are evident in Schön's (1983) research showing that how people frame their roles shapes their behavior, the results they achieve, what they learn, and how others perceive them.

We expect that the approach individuals take and how they frame their experiences will be important drivers of learning leadership. To the extent people see leadership as a risky endeavor or a situation in which they must prove their ability or avoid mistakes, their learning of leadership is less likely. In contrast, approaching the experience with a learning orientation should enhance leadership development (DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

We also concur with the notion that specific, difficult goals enhance performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). In particular, individuals who set specific, developmental goals as they approach an experience are more likely to develop as leaders. For

example, goals to network more broadly, listen more deeply, or communicate more frequently can focus an individual's attention in the experience and create accountability for personal development.

Thus, to maximize the developmental value of any particular leadership experience, individuals need to set development goals, be aware of and manage how they frame the experience, and approach the experience with a learning orientation. These goals and cognitive frames will protect individuals from feelings of learned helplessness, overconfidence, and the fear and anxiety that come with leadership, and will ultimately enhance the learning of leadership.

#### *Action: What You Do Determines What You Get*

People go through experiences in different ways, and some patterns of action yield far more learning from experience than others. We propose that learning from experience is most likely to occur when individuals are mindfully engaged in the experience. Mindful engagement entails three activities. First, individuals must actively experiment with leadership. Active experimentation is one of the four stages in Kolb's (1984) learning styles model, and we propose that it is a key practice in mindful engagement. Individuals must work proactively to craft the experience and experiment with various leadership approaches until they find the most effective for themselves and the situation. For example, managers who have never been good listeners might experiment with being present and hearing others out, or managers who have never been visionary can experiment with setting a new direction for their groups.

Second, people learn from experience when they seek and receive feedback from others (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Thus, mindful engagement involves periodically "checking in" with key constituents to obtain feedback. Such information allows individuals to either change their behaviors or manage constituent expectations.

Finally, mindfully engaged individuals actively regulate their cognitions and emotions during the experience. Individuals learn best when they are able to focus on the task (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989) and regulate their emotions in ways that facilitate effective information processing (Forgas & George, 2001; Richards & Gross, 2000). To the extent individuals can achieve focus and regulate their emotions, their ability to learn from experience will grow.

Active cognitive and emotional regulation during action is especially important because experiences that build leadership are often highly ambiguous and filled with anxiety and uncertainty that can challenge one's sense of identity (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). To learn leadership, individuals must stay focused during the experience, keep their thinking and processing of information systematic, and not let the demands of the situation dictate their emotional state of being.

Each of these activities—active experimentation, feedback seeking, and cognitive and emotional regulation—is a difficult accomplishment. Leadership carries with it some inherent risks (Heifetz, 1994), as actions may not yield expected results. Seeking feedback involves both the ego risk of hearing that one is not performing perfectly and also the image risk in how such seeking might look to others (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Cognitive and emotional regulation is effortful. They demand a willingness to invest in becoming more self-aware and an ability to bring greater control to one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Mindful engagement also becomes more difficult as individuals achieve success and are promoted higher in the organization (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001). With greater experience and loftier job titles, individuals are expected "to know," and thus, maintaining an active experimenting and feedback-seeking stance is increasingly difficult (Ashford, 1986). However, individuals who can maintain a pattern of action that involves active experimenting and feedback seeking gain a learning advantage over those who cannot.

### *Reflection: You Learn How to Go Forward by Looking Backward*

Reflection—quite possibly a manager's least favorite activity. Yet, reflection is a key step in the process of mindful engagement. Managers are action-oriented or, as McCall notes, they "just sort of dash around a lot." Indeed, scholars have noted that most people live life as a series of "happenings which pass through their systems undigested. Happenings become experiences [only] when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns and synthesized" (Alinsky, 1971, pp. 68–69; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003). Thus, for leaders to learn from experience, they must first truly *have* experiences that require reflection. Learning leadership from experience requires that individuals digest and process their experiences to understand what enabled or stood in the way of success, how their behaviors and characteristics contributed, and how the behavior of others impacted them.

Research on the practice of after-action reviews suggests that there are four keys to successful reflection: focus on a few critical issues, reflect in close temporal proximity to the action, follow a structured process, and lead back to action quickly (Baird, Holland, & Deacon, 1999). Ellis and Davidi (2005) remind us that our reflection should not be reserved only for failures, but should be undertaken following successes as well. Indeed, Anseel et al.'s (in press) findings show that reflection is most effective in conjunction with feedback.

None of these ideas, in and of themselves, are new. For example, Kolb (1984) highlighted the value of active experimentation, Ashford and Cummings (1983) discussed the costs and benefits of feedback seeking, and Schön (1983) highlighted the power of reflection. What is new is the recognition that it is not the provision and completion of experiences that develop leaders. Rather, it is how individuals go through their experiences that matters. Although the attributes of mindful engagement are easy to state, there

can be perils in their execution as we have described. However, these ideas give organizations looking to develop leaders an additional lever. In addition to crafting experiences and matching people to experiences, organizations can and should focus on how to engender and support mindful engagement by their leadership talent.

The power really is with the people!

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