

A Life Long Process

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Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: How are we doing, in general, with respect to developing leaders today?

Day: It depends on who you talk to. We know the level or rate of leader derailment hasn't really changed that much over the last few decades. If you look at that evidence, it seems to suggest that we haven't made a lot of progress in terms of preparing leaders for the challenges of the times. But, it may be that we are just running behind the change that is happening and the challenges. One hypothesis is that we are doing a lousy job of developing leaders and that has been static. Another hypothesis is that we have actually gotten better at developing leaders but the challenges are more complex at an increasingly rapid pace. Put another way, our development hasn't kept up with the rapidly changing world and the challenges therein. If you look at that as evidence, it is a little disheartening but it is a complex world and it is not getting any simpler.

Lindsay: Could you elaborate on some of those challenges that you see in the leadership landscape today and into the future?

Day: It is the notion of the interconnectedness of things...the interdependencies. No matter what domain you are in, you need to think about things globally, not locally or even regionally. I think that is becoming more prevalent and more prevalent at lower levels in organizations. That is one particular challenge, this idea of leading across the world, across different cultures and languages but there are also the related challenges of trying to diagnose and intervene on issues that have so many interconnected causes. This is one reason why the field is beginning to acknowledge the importance of things like shared leadership or what I call collective leadership capacity, which is

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moving beyond what any one leader can do to solve the challenges of our time. Working with others to try to address what seem to be intractable problems is much more likely to provide new insights and solutions to these challenges.

Lindsay: It seems, though, like we still have a very individualistic approach to leadership when you look at the different theories that are popular today like authentic and transformational leadership that focus on the leader. However, what it seems like you are talking about is that the interconnectedness of the world is forcing us to look at what Barbara Kellerman talks about as leadership as a system with the leader, follower, and the context. Are we misaligned by focusing too much on the individual?

Day: It's not an either-or, but an and-both. We need to continue to invest in developing individuals as leaders but we also need to work on ways of connecting them into systems of leadership. There is recent work being done on network approaches to leadership and I think that is interesting in terms of how we may be able to measure and model capacity for leadership in more sophisticated ways. There is also research and theory building being done on multiteam systems and the leadership involved in those which is a very complex operation. But, the world lags behind and people in the world still have a very leader centric, heroic, romanticized notion of what leadership is. As a crisis unfolds, I think it is human nature to look for a person who will save us from that crisis. How do we unlock that mindset of focusing on an individual leader to thinking more about how can people work together to create leadership? The classic saying is how can we develop people to be a leader even when they aren't the formal leader and work together with others to create a very deep and rich system of leadership?

Lindsay: You just mentioned some promising leadership that is happening. If we are lagging behind a bit and trying to make sense of this complex, ever

changing environment, are there gaps that you are noticing that we need more research in?

Day: I think a lot of leadership research is still very much measurement bound. You have a published measure that is purportedly about leadership and people will use it and claim that they have discovered something about leadership. I'm becoming increasingly skeptical that we can learn anything new from the application of either an old or new survey-based measurements of leadership. We know from the work back in the 1970s that people don't have unbiased perceptions of their leaders. It is influenced by a host of things, especially how successful we think the leader's group or organization has been. Yet, we still tend to approach leadership as what subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors means and the relationship to various outcomes. Specifically, performance, which is a very complex outcome that is causally determined by any number of things, is multiply predicted. To say that leadership is the sole cause of that is an oversimplification writ large.

Lindsay: What should leader development look like then? If you have an organization that is thinking about wanting to develop leaders, do you have any advice for them?

Day: One of the first places to start is to get rid of all of the bad practices that are out there. The non-evidence based fads and fashions that we tend to follow based on whatever the latest guru has written in a book that is purportedly the panacea for all of our leadership development. I have been reading some things in *Industrial & Organizational Psychology* from years ago and I came across a piece by Marv Dunnette in *The American Psychologist* from 1966 where the title of it is, *Fads, Fashions, and Folderol in Psychology*¹. The folderol, he defines as practices characterized by excessive ornamentation, nonsensical and unnecessary

¹ Dunnette, M. (1966). Fads, fashions, and folderol in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 21(4), 343.

actions, trifles, and essentially useless and wasteful fiddle-faddle. I think where organizations should start is not by doing more, but by actually doing less of the fiddle-faddle. Cleaning the decks of fiddle-faddle is a great place to start followed by rethinking what are we really trying to do here? We are trying to develop capacity in individuals to lead better.

Now, I think it is an illusion to think that any organization can develop someone who doesn't want to be developed. You cannot make someone develop and yet we still seem to have this event based, episodic thinking that we will just send him or her to another program. Then, we will find another program to send them to and that these programs will develop this person into a better leader. One of the truisms behind the science of leader development is that

it is continuous and ongoing. People don't develop if they are comfortable. One of my favorite analogies that I like to spring on people these days has to do with the question of, what do you think is involved in developing as a leader? A number of people, and these range from emerging leaders in college to more senior leaders running complex functions or organizations, think that it is a trip to Disneyland. You get a ticket to the amusement park, you go on some rides, and you come out and say that was great and somehow you are changed. I don't think that is the right metaphor. I think the right metaphor is leader development as a gym membership. You have to go to the gym and you have to grunt, work, sweat, and challenge yourself if you are going to change yourself. We know from gym memberships, however, that many people buy them and the percentage that actually use them is low. It's pretty bad. But also the percentage of people that use gym membership appropriately is abysmal. You go to a gym and it's basically a socialization venue rather than a development venue. People are chatting and

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strutting around and they might do a little something on an elliptical trainer for a few minutes and then are back to talking and wandering around. Do they really think they are going to change their aerobic capacity or anything about their muscle mass? No, you have to work hard at a gym if you are going to get yourself in shape. The same thing applies to leader development. You really have to think about it as a gym membership where the responsibility is on you to challenge yourself and find places where you can practice and become a better leader.

Lindsay: You mentioned that people don't develop if they are comfortable. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Day: It goes to one of the cornerstones about what we know about using experience for development. It needs to be a challenging experience. Something that gets you out of your comfort zone. Something that requires you to do things differently or try to do things differently. It is tied into learning and this is why performance is not the right outcome because we know that when people are trying to do things differently, we often see performance drop before we see an eventual improvement. Then, it becomes a question from a research standpoint of when do you measure this? How do you know if you captured the true trajectory of what is changing?

I think one of the things about human beings that is interesting is that we seem to be the only species that will approach rather than avoid this notion of

challenge or pain in the name of development. I can't think of another species that will do that. We are different in that regard. However, unless we do that we stop developing once our maturation growth cycles have finished in our late teens and early 20s. The developmental theorists like Piaget thought that once you hit your early 20s, you are done. We see some people who once they hit that time, they are done and don't really do anything that really challenges themselves. They watch a lot of television, may do their job which is routine, have fun, but it nothing that really changes their mindset, their worldviews, or their human capacities or potentialities. That said, some people do challenge themselves and they actively seek out these challenges whether they are the adventure seekers, so-called adrenaline junkies, or people who want to improve their capacity to influence and interact with people for a common goal. This brought along a change in developmental theory around what is called post-formal operations. This is the neo-Piagetian approach that says that people can continue to develop across the lifespan. It doesn't mean that they invariably will because it depends a lot of what they do in terms of experiences that they create to challenge themselves to create a capacity to do new and different things. It is the idea that it is on the individual. If you don't do that, then you really won't develop in any meaningful way beyond early adulthood.

Lindsay: It ties back to what you were talking about earlier about why performance is problematic as the sole outcome measure. If I am just attending to my performance or results, and I see that they are good or I receive some sort of feedback that it is good enough, then there really isn't an impetus to do more since the results are acceptable and the organization seems to be happy.

Day: That's right. It is the mindset of every challenge that you have faced in the past is going to be just like the ones that you face in the future. That's clearly

not the case. We know enough about job transitions, promotions, and derailment that people don't necessarily prepare themselves for what they are experiencing in a new role. It is the overreliance of what they overlearned in a previous role. The classic example is the engineer who is the best engineer in the department, who gets promoted to a leadership position who still wants to be the best engineer, and approaches every problem as if it was another engineering problem. They don't think of themselves as a leader but as an engineer.

That is why I think identity processes and leader identity processes in particular, are so important. We know, and this is a fact, that people will do things that they think are important for them. That means that they do things that are consistent with their identity. So, having a leader identity and helping someone internalize a leader identity is part and parcel to the leader development process because it is a basic resource allocation issue. We only have so many resources (with time being the most valuable of these resources) and we allocate them to things that are important to us, which are things that are tied to our identity. So, if you don't think of yourself as a leader, you are less likely to invest in trying to develop yourself as a leader. I've seen it with engineers, accountants, and people who have come up though technical specialties who have a difficult time letting go of that identity in order to internalize or enhance a different identity. It usually involves an entirely different set of skills around leadership.

Lindsay: How would you describe a leader identity?

Day: I have to say this with an asterisk because the identity literature has numerous different approaches to studying identity from a social identity, to a narrative identity, to a role identity, which is where I tend to come from. That is to what extent do you think being a leader is important to who you are? If you don't think that being a leader is important to who you are, then I

don't think you have a very strong internalized leader identity. If you think that being a leader is important to you, then you have a stronger leader identity and that will dictate how you spend your time and how you allocate your resources. If you are thinking about ongoing experience as the lifeblood of development, you are going to be more likely to invest the resources and find ways to challenge and develop yourself as a leader.

Lindsay: It is common to hear the terms leader development and leadership development used interchangeably. I know you have made distinctions between those two terms. Would you mind explaining the difference?

Day: It is trying to be clear about what your interventions are trying to accomplish. Most of what we call leadership development is really leader development. There isn't anything wrong with that, but we should be clear about the target of our developmental interventions: It is to develop someone's capacity to be a more effective leader. It doesn't necessarily mean that any leadership will be developed because leadership comes about through the social interactions in some shared workspace. In other words, what is developed is eventually applied to address experienced leadership challenges. The notion of leadership development really involves, in my mind, the notion of moving toward a collective capacity around leadership. The leadership is tied to the connections between people engaged in some shared work. This is why I like the whole network perspective on leadership that is emerging. So, leader development is really about investing in developing an individual's leadership capacity but it doesn't necessarily mean there will be better leadership because it is much more of a complex undertaking that has more moving parts. The

leadership development piece is more about developing the overall capacity in an intact system, like a team, to draw forth leadership when the challenges require it.

Another reason why I really strive for this clarification between leader development and leadership development is that if you confuse the two and you talk about leader development as leadership development then you think you have your problem solved. That you have developed some higher level of leadership in your organization but, in reality, you have just perpetuated this leader centric approach to leadership. This is especially the case in corporate organizations around high-potential programs. They say that they are going to invest in the top two percent of our thousands or hundreds of thousands of employees to be the next generations of leaders and that these special "high potential" leaders will solve all of the problems for us. That is the implicit message that is being sent. It perpetuates a very leader centric, heroic, and romanticized notion of what it means to lead in this century.

We know that people don't act in just one way. They act in a lot of different ways due to a lot of different reasons. Trying to then capture this dynamic changing notion of leader behaviors is a challenge for researchers.

Lindsay: With that distinction in mind, are there some promising lines of research or work that is being done around this idea of leader capacity?

Day: There are a number of points that are converging around dynamic leader behaviors. This is tied to changes from previous research which looked at leader behaviors as static entities that can be captured by subordinate ratings. We know that people don't act

in just one way. They act in a lot of different ways due to a lot of different reasons. Trying to then capture this dynamic changing notion of leader behaviors is a challenge for researchers. People are starting to adopt methods that are more dynamic and longitudinal, using different kinds of measurement procedures like event sampling to try to capture that. Now, will it lead to any new and different understanding of leadership? I actually think it will. I think where it can be especially helpful is in better understanding this notion of a leader's capacity to lead. If you think about it in terms of a volume metric, some leaders have greater volume with their leadership capacity than others. How do we measure that? I think one way is to see how they use different kinds of skills and competencies in different situations. It is a situational approach but it is also the idea of how can a leader concoct or create an effective approach to a challenge they have never experienced before using things that they cobbled together in the moment. I think that is where developmental capacity comes in.

Lindsay: The approach of examining leadership capacity is a helpful one because it gets away from the idea that some people have regarding innate aspects about leadership. To your point, some may have more overall capacity, but everyone can fill the capacity that they do have to be a better a leader.

Day: Absolutely. Some people are born with more potential than others in many aspects like, sports, music, science, or even leadership. But we also know that there are a lot of people that are born with vast potential that do nothing with it. As a result, you have someone who could have been a contender who really didn't live up to their potential. We see it over and over again. We also see the converse of that. Someone who wasn't born with all of the raw gifts in terms of raw potential, but work really hard to develop what they do have and fly by the people who had the raw potential but didn't do anything with it.

Lindsay: Would you say that some of the difference between those who seemingly over achieve and those that don't live up to their potential is their ability to see themselves as a leader?

Day: I think so. It's the idea of wanting it. They want to develop as a leader because it is a part of who they are. Where does that come from? That is a darn good question. When does it start to emerge? That's another good question. I think these questions point to the notion that we need to have more of a lifespan perspective on leader development. Not just at the older adult end of the continuum, but more at the early childhood end as well.

Lindsay: So, the ability to expose people to this idea of leadership as an identity to help them see this as part of what the normal maturation process is as a leader?

Day: Absolutely. In a 2015 paper that I did with Lisa Dragoni², we talked about this notion of proximal versus distal outcomes of development. People haven't really thought about time in leader development in any kind of rigorous or systematic way. Ours was a bit of a crude start at that, but if you think about proximal indicators of leader development, we organized them into two categories. One set of categories is around the knowledge, skill, and abilities (KSAs) and leadership competencies that people can learn. There are things that people can learn in a relatively short amount of time like influence. We know from Robert Cialdini's work that there are certain principles of persuasion that people can learn and become better negotiators and influencers. That is part of being a good leader. The other category of proximal indicators of leader development is self-views. Identity is one of those self-views along with self-awareness or understanding where your tendencies are and where your blind spots might be. The whole notion of self-efficacy is having

² Day, D., & Dragoni, L. (2015). Leadership development: An outcome-oriented review based on time and levels of analysis. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2(1), 133-156.

confidence that you can develop as a leader and ultimately be effective as a leader. These things you can work on as part of a leader development system and find relatively strong change in a fairly short amount of time. Now, whether it is weeks or months, remains to be seen and still needs to be documented in the literature. But it is still more proximal than things that are much deeper and fundamental to a person that get at their fundamental operating system. What are their core values and core world views?

Lindsay: So, we need to not just think proximally, but start to change people's mental models to get to some of the more distal things.

Day: What is tied into an individual's capacity as a leader is also tied into their complexity of self. The complexity of self is tied into things that are part of constructive developmental theory or post-formal operations in adults. It is really moving from how you see the world in relatively simplistic ways, which we all do when we are younger, to thinking about them in increasingly more complex and interconnected ways. Some researchers talk about requisite complexity. This construct has been around for a long time yet it remains very difficult to quantify. The thinking is that we need leaders whose complexity of world view matches or exceeds the complexity of those leadership challenges in the world that are faced. The research that has been done in this area has shown that the complexity of our leaders in terms of adult development metrics is well below the complexity of the world challenges. So, that may be one of the reasons why we continue to experience high levels of leader derailment and problems in moving certain world problems toward a solution. It is that the complexity of thinking of the people in the positions of leadership that should be doing something about that are ill-equipped to deal with the underlying complexity in the world.

We need people who are working across all kinds of different lanes because the real problems anymore aren't in any one lane.

Lindsay: Is that something that you would advocate for in starting earlier in the education system? Is that a larger issue with our educational system of not introducing that complexity early on?

Day: It is endemic in our educational systems. I once had a conversation with a former provost at a major university. He said, "You know Dr. Day, the world has problems, and universities have departments." So, how do we go about in higher education in helping people to develop multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary thinking? The reality is that it is difficult to do in our current university tenure and promotion systems. You have to publish in your discipline, create a reputation in your discipline, and get evaluated by people in your discipline who have a specialized set of academic skills if you are going to keep your job. That just reinforces the notion of staying in your lane. We need people who are working across all kinds of different lanes because the real problems anymore aren't in any one lane.

Lindsay: Could that be why people have narrow identities if they are used to being in just one lane.

Day: Sure. You see it in every organization. You go to a corporate organization and you talk to the marketing people and everything is a marketing problem. If you talk to someone in operations and everything is an operation problem. These are the functional blinders that we put on when we become experts in a particular area.

Lindsay: With all of this in mind, when you look at the next five to 10 years of leadership scholarship and

development are you optimistic, pessimistic, or waiting to see?

Day: I'm optimistic about this. When I first got into this area of leader development, there wasn't really anything there. There was no theory or rigorous research and a lot of people thought there wouldn't ever be. That it was basically a space that was owned by practitioners and would always be owned by practitioners. We have seen a change in that and we see more top tier journals in management and applied psychology publishing research on leader and leadership development. There are younger scholars who have taken on this mantle of working with something that has historically been the purveyance of practitioners to try to develop some theoretically grounded and evidence-based insight into how people develop as leaders. That I find very encouraging.

Lindsay: Do you see consultants and practitioners starting to take notice of that?

Day: On one hand, I think there is more attention being paid to evidence-based practices of all kinds. I think that is a good thing. But, I am also very cynical to how some consultancies operate. It sometimes is less about solving the problem as it is about continuing the problem and billing accordingly. This is coupled with the tendency for many consulting companies come at problems with their own proprietary tools. As a result, every problem can be solved only with that proprietary set of tools. It is a version of the functional blinders that we talked about a few minutes ago. Whether or not it is the appropriate tool to use or the most evidence-based practice, that tool tends to be taken out of the tool box because it is tied to the treasure chest of the consultancies.

Lindsay: It reminds me of the old saying, of when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

We also can see it sometimes with therapy when it sometimes seems like therapy continues on forever, regardless of whether the problem is ever solved or not.

Day: Have you ever heard of a psychotherapist tell a client that they are done? I haven't. Some could say, look Day, it's a lifelong endeavor and maybe these problems are lifelong things that you need to work through. Still, I've never heard a psychotherapist say that they are finished. You are cured.

Lindsay: One final question for you. In thinking about leader identity and the notion of lifelong development, what advice would you have for young leaders to keep in mind as they start on their journey?

Day: Start as soon as possible. There is a tendency of students to focus on the technical skills that they want. Make some space to start developing yourself as a leader of others. Start as soon as possible and don't think that you need to wait until you are mid-career to do it because you will be way behind if that happens. The other thing is to take ownership of it. Don't expect someone to develop you because it is never going to happen. It can't happen. Nobody can make you develop. You need to challenge yourself to develop. The third thing is we know there are evidence-based tools and practices out there that are free for anyone to use but you need the discipline to implement them and to practice them. Two key ones are feedback and self-reflection. The notion of not just taking on experiences but also capturing the learning from those experiences through self-reflection is really important. You also need to think about how to build a feedback intensive environment around yourself where you not only can give feedback freely to people in ways that they can accept and develop, but also how you can solicit feedback from others that can be part of your assessment data as well as support system going forward as a developing leader.

Lindsay: That is great advice. Any final thoughts?

Day: A final thing would be that it is a journey and you can't expect it to be completed in a few weeks or even a few years. It really is a lifelong process. One of the things that you learn is that you might be a pretty good leader now, a 7 or 8 out of a 10-point scale and you think you don't need to work on it because you have it all pretty much figured out. But we know, the farther you go and the higher up you advance in any organization, the challenges get more wicked and complex and you learn that it isn't out of 10 anymore, but out of 100 or 1,000. You don't want to be stuck at seven. By the way, this doesn't just happen to junior leaders but happens to mid and senior level leaders as well.

Lindsay: It really is an investment mentality for the future.

Day: I like that. It makes sense. Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts.