What Makes Leadership Development Impactful? Exploring a Whole-Person Approach

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Reconsidering the Essence of Effective Leadership Development

In our Harvard Business Review article published on February 28, 2023, "*What Makes Leadership Development Programs Succeed*," we unveiled the pivotal factors distinguishing impactful leadership development programs from ineffective ones. The insights we shared in this article built upon our ongoing and published empirical research on the outcomes of leadership development initiatives (Yemiscigil et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023a). Motivated by this work, the aim of this leadership perspective is to propose a novel lens in establishing effective leadership learning and development through a new understanding of expectations, intentionality, and measurement of outcomes (Born, 2016; Born et al., 2012, 2017, 2019; Enger et al., 2010; Hendrix et al., 2015; Yemiscigil et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023a).

Although leadership development is ingrained in the DNA of our service academies and the military (Enger et al., 2010), it has burgeoned into a substantial industry, estimated at about $60 billion worldwide. It represents approximately 35% of training budgets facilitated by consultancies, human resources offices, coaches, and business/policy schools. Despite this scale, there is growing criticism that the leadership development programs

are following attention-grabbing developmental approaches that are not backed by evidence (see Born et al., NAS Committee Report, 2020 for examples). Importantly, evidence of learning and development is somewhat ambiguous and is often limited primarily to professional competencies overlooking a broader lens of what could be achieved in leadership development. This is in part driven by the absence of theoretically rooted models on how leadership development functions as well as a dearth of methodologically rigorous research on the topic (Day et al., 2021). This prompts critical questions: What return do investments in leadership development yield for leaders and companies? Does leadership development genuinely instigate change among leaders? What type of change is being and could be pursued?

Why is this exploration essential? The quest for effective leadership is a paramount need in all sectors (Born, 2016; Born et al., 2013; Born & Goldstein, 2018; Cook et al., 2021; Kirschner & Born, 2018). Leadership development stands as the fundamental process for nurturing leaders who can exercise more impactful leadership. This quest gains heightened significance, especially for individuals in positions of influence. However, as it is often acknowledged, true leadership isn't merely about being in charge; it is fundamentally about caring for those under your charge and protecting and promoting the well-being of one's constituents (Pirson, 2019). Yet, a critical missing piece of fulfilling this purpose is an acknowledgment that caring for the well-being of others may start with caring for oneself. This is exemplified by the idea of "putting one's own oxygen mask on first" for enabling more effective guidance and support for others.

In this article, we propose that an acknowledgement of the critical role of leader's self and identity in effective leadership beckons the call for a fundamental rethinking of leadership development, its effectiveness, and outcomes. We specifically argue that this rethinking draws attention to the development of what is commonly referred to as "authentic leaders" who can understand and act upon who they are and why they lead in the broad context of their lives, including at work and beyond work. It is through an evaluation of interventions on authentic leadership development pedagogy focusing on the whole-person and the "who and why" of leadership that we hope to generate a new inquiry into the tangible and empirically demonstrable benefits of leadership development.

Unlocking the Black Box of Authentic Leadership Development

Despite the commendations and accolades showered upon our leadership development programs through enthusiastic evaluations, our experiences as seasoned educators of leaders and of authentic leadership pedagogy revealed a discrepancy. While these assessments often sufficed for program developers and employers to assert the success of their initiatives, we remained skeptical. We were unconvinced that these evaluations painted an accurate or comprehensive picture of the actual change experienced, if any, by the participants. We wanted to discover what measurable changes were occurring in the programs using rigorous empirical methods.

Motivated by this realization, our ongoing and published research embarked on a quest to demystify the elusive nature of authentic leadership development. Our goal was to delve into its impact and investigate to what extent, for whom and why authentic leadership development might be beneficial. Over the past 5 years, our methodology involved a comprehensive examination. We conducted longitudinal surveys with multiple cohorts from six distinct leadership development programs attended by private sector, non-profit and public sector leaders in professional schools and organizations. The diverse sample incorporated about 500 employees and leaders with

varying backgrounds, tenure, and ranks (Yemiscigil et al., 2022a, 2023a).

The Embrace of Authentic Leadership Approach

Central to our approach was the intentional adoption of an authentic leadership pedagogy as an intervention across multiple leadership development programs. Authentic leadership, rooted in identity-based perspectives, fosters a profound shift in leaders' sense of being (Brooks & Winfrey, 2023; Craig & Snook, 2014, 2022; George, 2015; George & Clayton, 2022; George et al., 2007; Gergen, 2022). Drawing from Warren Bennis's assertion that "learning is experiencing a personal transformation," we recognized that learning is not a mere collection of possessions but a journey toward becoming a new person. This philosophy underscored our focus on self-concept, identity, and the intrinsic values that define leadership, and enabling leaders to answer questions like "Who am I? Why am I leading? Who do I want to become?"

Our emphasis was not on the acquisition of technical skills but on enhancing generalized behavioral capacities, such as decision-making and resilience that are applicable at work and beyond. The core principle lies in nurturing positive growth in leaders' entire selves and broader work and non-work identities. An identity-based approach expounded the interconnectedness between professional and personal growth, facilitating the development of broad behavioral capacities applicable to all facets of life. An example is the cultivation of not only psychological safety within teams but leaders' psychological bravery in all areas of life (Born & Caliguiri, 2024). This integration is not only critical for sustained improvements in workplace performance, but also pivotal for psychological well-being, culminating in a more harmonious alignment with one's identity and the encompassing aspects of life (Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012; Rampersad & Hussain, 2014).

Key Factors for Effective Leadership Development

Our research uncovered several essential considerations for potent and impactful leadership development programs:

(1) **Focus on Holistic Growth**: Programs that develop leaders in multiple life areas generate better outcomes, leading to a significant transformation both professionally and personally.

(2) **Encourage Self-Reflection**: Allowing participants time and structure for introspection prompts reorientation, benefiting personal lives and careers. This reflective space contributes to a clearer sense of purpose.

(3) **Address Stress with Precision**: Target programs to coincide with high-stress periods to effectively mitigate stress and bolster well-being. During stressful times, leadership development yields greater stress reduction and enhanced happiness.

(4) **Opt for Shorter, Intensive Programs**: Surprisingly, shorter programs often produce significant positive changes, at times rivaling the impacts of therapeutic mental health interventions. Short-term intensive programs provide optimal results.

(5) **Attention to Resistance**: Acknowledge and support individuals who might resist growth due to strong self-views or other psychological barriers. Tailor approaches to address resistance and cultivate development.

(6) **Strategies for Sustained Impact**: Recognize that growth and well-being changes might fade over time due to adaptation. Focus on establishing habits and continued engagement post-program for sustained growth.

(7) **Online Programs for Efficiency**: Both online and in-person programs yield somewhat similar results, providing an efficient and effective avenue for leadership development. Embrace the flexibility of online programs for broader reach without compromising impact.

Fostering Well-Being: A New Moral Imperative

Our research revealed that one of the most important benefits of authentic leadership development could be well-being. Recognizing the imperative of preventing burnout, our focus on well-being was inspired by the ethical responsibility to safeguard against the perils of its absence. According to well-being expert Jennifer Moss (2021) in "The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It," burnout emerges as a prevalent crisis. This drove our attention toward understanding and preventing stress among leaders. Yet, well-being is not only the negative outcomes but also about positive outcomes that underscore optimal psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989; Yemiscigil et al., 2021), so we also assessed and found improvements in sense of personal growth and purpose in life among leaders undertaking leadership development that emphasizes authentic leader identity and whole-person approach.

The resonance between well-being and its far-reaching impact on social and organizational outcomes underscores its critical importance. Despite the growing awareness of its significance, intentional cultivation of well-being remains an elusive domain. Our knowledge remains scarce concerning the well-being and functioning of leaders, despite their significant influence (Guest, 2017; Kelloway & Barling, 2010; Li et al., 2018; Moss, 2021). Unveiling the impact of leadership development on the psychological well-being and functioning of leaders becomes a pivotal pursuit. The common perception of well-being often gravitates toward positive feelings and wellness practices, typically viewed through a hedonic lens. Our research emphasized that leadership development can play a pivotal role in promoting well-being, emphasizing eudemonic well-being, the growth and purpose people experience in life (Ryff, 1989; Yemiscigil et al., 2023b), while tackling stress. These ideas expand organizational theories, highlighting the fact that professional leadership development can be a precursor to holistic well-being, delivering benefits for the whole person rather than only the leader in a professional role.

Conclusion: Rethinking Leadership Development's Impact

Organizations have been seeking to measure return on investment of leadership development programs based on performance outcomes, something that has rarely been accomplished to date. However, our research brings to light a different angle: effective leadership development significantly contributes to personal growth and well-being in both personal and professional realms. In the post-pandemic world, where companies struggle to establish genuine engagement and connections, the significance of these new success metrics should not be underestimated. These metrics can positively impact work performance and employee retention, offering an overlooked but promising path toward well-being and engagement in the workplace.

In essence, our findings underline that well-conceived learning interventions can tangibly enhance well-being in the workplace over the short term. Leadership development, when approached holistically, delivers psychological benefits, shedding light on its efficacy and motivational implications. The data suggest that individual agency plays a pivotal role in transforming growth into well-being. Looking ahead, there remain compelling questions: How does whole-person growth impact performance and leaders' relationships with their teams? How does it compare with more technical developmental approaches? How can we ensure lasting effects rather than momentary shifts?

What Resonates: Empowering Leadership Development for Human-Centered Workplaces of the Future

Finally, we have been moved by the overwhelmingly positive responses to our research and practitioner articles.

The heartfelt feedback speaks to the resonance of our findings and their applicability, not only in leadership training programs but also for individuals seeking avenues for their personal growth and skill development. We have synthesized that our findings can be especially important for empowering leadership development for the human-centered workplaces of the future through the following avenues:

Whole-person approaches can cultivate agility and adaptability amidst uncertainty. A critical perspective shared by readers underscores the significance of developing future leaders who can navigate evolving business challenges, suggesting an imperative focus on skill elevation and uplifting competencies to navigate an ever-evolving business landscape. The feedback indicates that this approach is not just desirable but increasingly vital in today's dynamic work environment.

Personal growth in leaders can promote authentic connection and relationships at work. We all seek leaders who are more "human," leaders who connect, understand, and empathize with the challenges of work and workers. Our research reinforces the notion that leaders who are less stressed, growing themselves, more self-reflective and have higher sense of personal direction are more able to make these connections with their colleagues and subordinates.

Autonomy and personal agency can fuel the fire of continuous learning and growth. The diverse range of comments also underlines the significance of learner autonomy and the effectiveness of cohort models in leadership development. These insights echo our belief in encouraging a participative, active learning process and establishing supportive, nurturing environments to ensure continuous engagement in growth among busy leaders.

Well-being can be important for its own sake. The endorsements from our readers further reinforce the importance of addressing stress and well-being in leadership development, an aspect often sidelined but deemed critical. This recognition aligns with our core belief in promoting a more human-centered workplace. It's deeply heartening to know that our work is resonating with the shared aspirations of making workplaces more humane and cultivating genuine leadership. It's a clarion call for organizations to reflect on the comprehensive development of their leaders beyond mere business outcomes.

As we forge ahead, the affirmations and constructive thoughts shared in response to our research remind us of the transformational power of leadership development. We're spurred to continue our efforts in creating meaningful and sustainable change in the realm of leadership, fueling our curiosity to explore the intersection between personal development and enduring workplace impact.

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