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Learning to Lead: Foundations of Emerging Leader Identity Development

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Abstract

The Problem. Organizations face several challenges that stand poised to place a significant strain on the availability of qualified leaders. Flatter organization structures, the use of more teams, and impending retirements of the Baby Boomer generation mean that the field of HRD must be prepared to help organizations develop the next generation of leaders. Scholars and practitioners must ensure that leader development initiatives will effectively prepare the forthcoming leaders from amongst young adults.

The Solution. The focus of this study was to develop an understanding of how leadership experiences shape leader identity development. We offer a model that explains the dynamic, interactive process of leader identity development. Specifically, this model identifies the importance of relationships, leading by example, authenticity, and the motivation to lead for young adults.

The Stakeholders. HRD scholars and practitioners may use the findings in this study to target developmental initiatives for future leaders.

Keywords

Millennial generation, leader identity, leader development, young adults, adolescent leadership development

Learning to Lead: Foundations of Leader Identity Development

Organizations are faced with several challenges that exacerbate the need to develop the next generation of leaders (Avolio & Vogelgesang, 2011). Flatter organizational structures, task migration, and a move to the use of more teams in the workplace create the need for leaders at all levels within the organization (Avolio & Vogelgesang, 2011; Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). Further, in the current climate, changes in population demographics mean that the impending retirements of millions of Baby Boomers and declining birthrates in industrialized nations are projected to leave organizations with shortages of skilled workers (Avolio & Vogelgesang, 2011; Byham, 1999). A waning supply of talented workers will threaten the very existence of some organizations (Eversole, Venneberg, & Crowder, 2012). Recognizing these pressures, Heifetz (2006) issued an urgent call for scholars and practitioners to give thoughtful consideration to the preparation of young leaders to face the challenges of the complex world.

Acknowledging the importance of developing a qualified workforce, Hill, Kuchinke, and Zinser (2013) argued that 21st Century HRD professionals must consider how employee development begins before individuals enter the workforce in order to effectively address the shortages facing some professions. In some instances, employers rely on a candidate's early leadership experiences when making hiring decisions (van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Similarly, some employers expect that recent college graduates will possess certain leader characteristics such as interpersonal skills, drive, and adaptability upon arrival at the organization (Eisner, 2010). Taking a broader view of early factors and contexts that contribute to the development of a leader's identity is under explored and may provide insight into how to improve leader effectiveness and meet employer expectations (Murphy & Johnson, 2011; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013).

Problem Statement

Models of leader development exist within HRD literature but do not address identity development associated with early practice of leadership. The purpose of this study was to explore developmental experiences of young adult leaders to understand how experiences shaped the foundational leader identities of the participants. Specifically, how does participation in leadership positions within different venues of practice shape the leader identity development of future organizational leaders?

Literature Review

Of particular salience to HRD professionals, Avolio and Vogelgesang (2011) note that most developmental activities begin too late in life to make an optimal difference in a leader's behavior. . Murphy and Johnson (2011) suggest a lifespan view of leader development where the interaction of early learning experiences associated with education, sports, and practice are foundational to the developmental process of the leader. This foundational premise guides our exploration of the construct of leader identity development. The young adult leaders in this study practiced leadership within multiple venues and contexts during the participants' senior years of high school, at an employable age when the work of HRD and workforce development professionals overlap. Thus, the conceptual framework that guided this study includes literature on leadership and leadership identity development.

Leader and Leadership Development

Leadership is a process that involves the influence of individuals within a group context in order to achieve some goal (Northouse, 2016). The phenomenon of leadership has typically been identified as a trainable set of skills or abilities that are displayed during interactions by leaders who practice influencing followers to achieve some type of goal (Day, 2001). This study

examines the emergence of a leader's identity within both the context of the development of self-awareness of the individual leader and the building of interpersonal competencies including developing trust, practicing empathy, managing conflict, and team building associated with leadership development (Day, 2001). Because an individual's self-awareness as a leader is said to emerge from personal histories and trigger events that challenge personal development and growth (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005), exploring the early experiences of young leaders may increase the understanding of how leader identity develops as leader experiences at an early age may shape future leader development.

Learning across the lifespan. Leader development occurs at all stages of life and refers to "a continuous learning process that spans an entire lifetime; where knowledge and experience builds and allows for even more advanced learning and growth" (Brungardt, 1997, p. 83). A lifespan view of human development assumes that the individual changes across time as the individual is embedded in and is actively engaged with multiple contexts (Lerner, 1991). Leader development from a lifespan perspective implies an ongoing, lifelong process which begins in childhood and continues through adulthood, occurring through life experiences as leader identities are forged (Day et al., 2009).

Relational influences. Theories (i.e., transformational leadership) that view leadership as a reciprocal endeavor suggested that leadership emerges from the interaction between leaders and followers, making relational influences important to the leader development process (Northouse, 2016). Consequently, relationships formed through situational experiences in different contexts over the course of one's life have enduring consequences that influence later life transitions and behaviors (Elder, 1998). For example, the development of leaders within the context of the family can be explained through the use of a social learning framework as

adolescents have been found to model attributes of parental transformational leadership style

with peers (Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000). Early social training, positive family

behavioral models, and supporters influence in children the development of self-confidence,

reliability, assertiveness and the desire to seek leadership roles (Brungardt, 1997; Komives,

Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

Leader Identity Development and Practice

The literature suggested that leader development occurs over time through interactions

with others in activities that provide the experiences which led to the formation of leader identity

(Lord & Hall, 2005). In other words, the activities undertaken in the position of leader represent

practice situations where the individual is able to internalize the identity of a leader as he or she

gains leadership experience through interactions with others in the performance of the leadership

role. Identity that develops through these experiences relates to how people view themselves as

leaders and is cited as a precursor to leader development (Day et al., 2009).

Research supporting identity-based leader development proposed that identity is acquired

through knowing (gaining new perspectives), doing (producing new behaviors), and being

(development of a leader's self-concept) (Ibarra, Snook, & Ramo, 2010). Identity focuses on "the

meanings comprising the self as an object, gives structure and content to self-concept, and

anchors the self to social systems" (Gecas, 1982, p. 4). The individual's identity as a leader

grows from experiences in roles where there are encounters with other people in different social

contexts (Ibarra et al., 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005).

Identifying oneself as a leader is critical to the individual's continual development as a

leader (Lord & Hall, 2005). Furthermore, the stronger the view that one holds of self as a leader,

the more likely he or she will seek developmental experiences to strengthen his or her personal

foundation as a leader (Day & Harrison, 2007). This suggests that individuals who view themselves as leaders may eventually come to think like leaders (Ligon, Wallace, & Osburn, 2011). This identity as a leader guides a person's actions and aids the development of goals and objectives for the leader during times of practice (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Research Method

We used phenomenology to explore the nature of the practice of leadership and to understand the lived experiences of the young adult participants. This approach enabled deeper insight and understanding into the essence of common experiences that occur in the lived human world (van Manen, 1990). Purposeful sampling was utilized to obtain the five female and five male eighteen to twenty year old participants from the eastern region of Texas who had held some type of leadership position during their senior years of high school (Table 1). This age range was selected so as to capture the meaning of the leadership experiences within close proximity to the period of participation.

A three-stage semi-structured interview protocol (Seidman, 2006) was utilized where the first interview captured the participant's experience in the practice setting. The second interview investigated the more in depth experience of being a leader within the context of practice. The third interview explored the meaning of the experience of the practice of leadership. Each interview was transcribed prior to the beginning of the next so as to ask clarifying questions of each participant.

Emergent Themes

Four central themes emerged that influenced the development of the leaders' identities. These themes included developing relationships with others, leading by example, developing leader authenticity, and being motivated to lead. For instance, participants encountered

relationships with others including authority figures, fellow peer/officers, and organization

members. These relationships provided opportunities for affirmation and validation as leaders.

Participants observed as they learned to lead others and led others by example. Leader

authenticity emerged as participants mentioned dimensions of integrity, consistency of actions,

trust, responsibility, accountability, respect, and fairness. The last theme reflects the role of

motivation to lead from an internal drive as well as socially constructed perspective. The model

in Figure 1 was developed to represent the meaning of the contextual experiences and emergence

of leader identity.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Relationships

Relationships reinforced the participants' identities as leaders. An initial change in

identity occurred for the participants as they assumed the title and roles as leaders and sub-

identities were activated through the different social contexts (Day & Harrison, 2007). Three

primary sources of relationships informed the development of the leader identities for the

participants—authority figures, peers/fellow officers, and organization members.

Authority figures. While there were some negative experiences which caused stress and

tension for the participant leaders, participants generally described very positive relationships

with authority figures. The closeness of the relationships, which were characterized as

friendships or familial relationships, contributed to the development of a high degree of trust

between the participants and the authority figures. Through the experiences, the authority figures

grew to trust the student leaders to fulfill their duties. As a result, the delegation of duties to the

participants was based on the perception of the authority figure's view of the capabilities of their

positional leaders (Northouse, 2016). The quality of the relationship with authority figures lends

understanding as to how participants might be validated in their leadership roles. Likewise, the

quality of the dyadic relationship between the authority figure and participant leader was directly

influenced by the young leader's competence and skill, trust of the authority figure, and the

motivation on the part of the student leader to assume more responsibility (Liden & Graen,

1980).

For example, when Lyn's perception of support from the administrators changed, the

quality of the dyadic relationship fell as Lyn lost trust in the actions of the authority figures. Lyn

remained committed to the organization and was motivated to lead but the perceived lack of

support introduced stress into the dynamic situation. On the other hand, Ava's relationship with

the drill team director provides an example of a high quality relationship despite periods of

difficulty when the director sometimes resorted to relying on the rules of authority and

hierarchical structures to determine the outcome (Jago & Vroom, 1977). Similarly, Bob actively

maintained a higher quality dyadic relationship with his coach, responding to the coach's indirect

encouragement to become a leader. In Bob's words, his coach told him, "once you step up you're

forever going to step up and it becomes your role in the team." The high-quality relationships

produced a strong commitment to each other as well as mutual loyalty and commitment to

achieve the goals of the organization (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). These

findings are consistent with those of studies surrounding the theory of leader-member exchange

(LMX) where leaders choose the type of relationship to build with followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien,

1995).

Peer/Officer relationships. Peer relationships with fellow officers were important as the

relationships gave participants the opportunity to work collaboratively with others to lead their

teams. Because Beth was good friends with her co-drum major, she learned she could not "do

everything by myself…it taught me how to work better with others and I don't have to do everything that other people actually can help you with stuff." McLaughlin (2000) argued that using collaboration skills can strengthen the organization's performance. The co-leaders of some of the organizations structured themselves and assumed roles based on their personalities while relying on each other to fulfill duties and achieve the goals of the organizations. Being able to work in a collaborative manner is important in light of the greater complexity that occurs in organizations today (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Unfortunately, the foundation of the strong friendly relationships was not always enough to convince the leaders to relinquish control of the completion of projects, making it difficult for some participants to delegate responsibilities.

Organization members. Relationships with organization members gave the leaders the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills and connect emotionally with others (Riggio & Lee, 2007). Some organization members resisted, which personally challenged the participants and provided opportunities for personal growth. Even though the leader's position of authority was supported by the director or coach, participants recounted difficulties leading friends or people of the same age. Chip indicated, "There were certain people in certain situations that you would get into that they decided they didn't really see you as the leader." The interpersonal skills developed through these relational experiences provide a foundation to help participants navigate future interactions with diverse groups of people (Larson et al., 2002).

Leading by Example

The theme of leading by example was significant for participants as it was ultimately how the leaders learned to lead (leading from example) and then taught the next generation of leaders (leading by example). The role models participants emulated were older, experienced,

and displayed the characteristics, attributes, or behaviors that the participants thought would help

them be successful when they became the leaders. Bandura's (1977) principle of social learning

theory explains the active encoding and rehearsal that took place to convert the observed

behavior into actionable leadership. As the leaders successfully performed these learned

behaviors, their actions were reinforced through interactions with others which in turn helped the

participants come to identify themselves as leaders.

In Joan's case, the basketball coach's actions reinforced Joan as a leader because he

relied on Joan to achieve his objective of having a productive practice. Positive reinforcement of

Joan's behavior helped her internalize the expected model behavior of a captain. In contrast, the

threat of punishment convinced Bob that setting a bad example should be avoided in order to

remain on the swim team. Participants were cognitively aware of the influence their actions

would have on others who observed them in their positions of leadership as they led by example.

Lisa recounted her responsibility as a leader to "set a good example and be the right kind of

person that people should follow." Through collaboration facilitated by skilled individuals,

learning occurred that made it possible for these developing leaders to eventually perform the

function of leadership on their own (Vygotsky, 1978).

Developing Leader Authenticity

The third part of the model supports the presence of authentic attributes and

characteristics identified by these participants. The model displays a reciprocal connection

between identity and authenticity as the more participants successfully practiced authentic

behaviors, the more these behaviors reinforced the identity of the participants as leaders of

integrity and character. Authentic actions were present as participants were concerned with

whether behaviors observed by others were consistent with the words they espoused. Participants

described the importance of the attributes of trust, respect, accountability, and fairness derived

from life lessons taught by families and faith (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). For instance, Lyn

explained that being a leader is a challenge as it tests the character of the person because "you

can say that you have integrity and you can say that you have patience but when it's tested that's

when it really shows."

Consistency between words and actions for the leaders was paramount as they worked to

maintain not only their reputations but also the reputations of their organizations. They were

purpose-driven and wanted to be perceived as genuine and worthy of their positions; participants

felt that they were always being observed by others who were both internal and external to their

organizations. These findings are consistent with the tenets of authentic leadership as an

authentic leader is said to lead with conviction and purpose, to remain true to personal values,

and to base actions on values and beliefs while maintaining a high degree of integrity (Shamir &

Eilam, 2005).

Motivation to Lead

The final theme to emerge from the data was connected with the participants' motivation

to lead. Like developing authenticity, the motivation to lead for the participants is depicted in the

model as a reciprocal relationship with identity. This reinforcing relationship suggests that as

participants are motivated to lead, they are validated in those roles and identities as leaders and

may seek new roles as leaders and further develop a leader's identity (Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Embracing the motive to lead began very early for some participants who trained many years to

earn the positions and represent their organizations (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell,

1953). For other participants, diligent pursuit of the role occurred through participation in the

organization during high school. Nevertheless, different types of motivation seemed to energize

leader identity development for these participants—achievement, power, and sociability were most salient.

      Achievement. Achievement-oriented individuals worked to meet personal goals, assumed responsibility, took risks, and incorporated feedback as they pursued their goals (McClelland et al., 1953). Positive experiences that created positive emotional responses provided opportunity to reinforce both the leader's identity development as well as the individual's motive to continue to pursue success associated with leadership in other venues (Day & Lance, 2004; McClelland et al., 1953). Feedback served to reinforce the performance as the leader worked to improve (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

      The participants who were high in achievement motive liked to maintain control within their venues of practice. Some demonstrated difficulty with delegating responsibilities to others or sharing responsibility with co-leaders. The attitude of the leaders was consistent with findings of Rauch and Frese (2007) as many of the leaders expressed a desire to maintain control rather than delegate responsibilities to others. Winter (1973) associated the need for control with the person's need to act with autonomy. As a consequence, the desire of the leaders to control events in this study may be motivated by efforts to practice autonomy and achieve desired outcomes. Participants with more leader experiences were beginning to learn to delegate and see how the experiences helped others grow as leaders.

      Achieving the high profile positions provided status to the participants in this study as the structured hierarchies placed participants at the top of the organizations. The statuses of the individuals were validated whether they led people on the field or in a meeting. The continued successful replication of the behaviors reinforced the individuals' status as leaders of their organizations (Day & Lance, 2004). Tim (a soccer player) recounted his admiration for his role

model who was the senior goalie captain his freshman year as he was "always thinking freshman year I need to be like him."

Power. In part derived from this status, power also emerged through interactive relationships with authority figures and organization members. Positional power was delegated by the director or coach while the leaders gained personal power through follower interactions (French & Raven, 1959; Northouse, 2016). The conferred position of authority established the student leader's place at the top of the social system of the particular organization (Gecas, 1982).

Each of the authority figures ran the organization according to rules and norms of performance for the venue. Authority figures in sports venues looked to their young leaders to inspire and motivate organization members as they provided the leaders with the latitude to give team pre-game or pre-meet speeches in order to instill the desire for optimum performance on the part of the members. Inspiring others provided participants with the ability to practice a component of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978). The distinctive part for these leaders was that they acquired the legitimate power of the position but not the reward or coercive power as these powers were usually maintained by the directors or coaches. Some participants were given enforcement authority as they were responsible for keeping order to facilitate practice which placed a strain on relationships with peers and friends.

Personal power accrued to the leaders through the followers' perceptions. For instance, referent power came to the leaders as evidenced by them being liked by their followers while expert power was present as the followers acknowledged the leader's competence to hold the position (Northouse, 2016). The position and expert performance provided legitimate power and authority within the venue but did not guarantee personal power as participants were sometimes challenged by followers, especially in instances where leaders were younger than organization

members. "Sometimes it is hard because when you have someone that is your age that has

leadership over you that can bring a lot of…just a little bit of tension" (Lyn).

Sociability. Finally, another source of motivation for participants appeared as a result of

the social behaviors and experiences that influenced participants to lead. Some participants

simply enjoyed leading. The desire to wear the gold hat of the drill captain began in first grade

for Ava. When she achieved her goal, she found that she "loved to lead. I enjoyed facilitating the

practice." Chan and Drasgow (2001) described this phenomenon as an affective-identity

dimension where individuals see the qualities of leadership within themselves and like to lead.

The positive experiences encountered in the venue reinforced the development of their identities

as leaders (Lord, Hannah, & Jennings, 2011). Rewards for the sacrifices and performances came

to the participants as they were recognized as leaders. Participants recalled great satisfaction

associated with the achievements that they accomplished during their time as leaders; however,

Ben and Ava were reluctant to volunteer for future positions even though they enjoyed their time

as leaders. Ben, a Hispanic male who ran cross-country, saw himself as simply a member of the

team and unwilling to embrace the title of leader, even though he described performing leader

behaviors working with project teams in college. Ava, a Caucasian female drill team captain,

also chose not to actively seek leadership positions but indicated she would lead if asked to do so

and given formal authority.

<div align="center">**Implications for Practice**</div>

This study provides valuable insight into the foundational experiences of emerging

leaders that can help practitioners strengthen targeted interventions in the workplace. The

understanding gained from this study can be used to shape leader identity development

opportunities for young adult leaders who are emerging in the workforce. Supervisors or

managers may also benefit from interventions that strengthen their understanding of developing a new generation of leaders.

Emerging Leader Development

Because participants in this study learned to lead from the example of other leaders, emerging leaders may benefit from a structured mentor program. Pairing the new leaders with role models who display the desired behaviors and characteristics that are important to the organization may enhance learning for the new leaders. The findings in this study suggest that the young adult leader learns through observation and needs to have the interaction with more experienced leaders to develop the leader's identity and desired leadership skills (Lester, Hannah, Vogelsgesang, & Avolio, 2011; Ghosh, Haynes, & Kram, 2013)..

Some of the leaders in this study led organizations with very hierarchical structures which in turn fostered the need to control. Needing to practice control may limit the new leader's effectiveness and the future of organizations that rely on collaborative team structures. To operate in the complex environments of today's world, emerging leader development should include an understanding of the complexity of the organization's environment and delegation skills.

To address the issues that challenged participants related to leading older organization members, interventions should target developing interpersonal skills and diversity awareness to improve their effectiveness as leaders. The multi-generation workplace is now a fact of life for any generation of leaders; consequently, it is imperative that young   individuals learn to develop successful relationships with co-workers and those they are called to lead. Having the skills to successfully interact with multiple generations will create positive experiences for the emerging leaders and reinforce their leader identities (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Murphy, 2012).

Practitioners should be aware of underlying cultural differences as different individual perspectives may shape how emerging leaders embrace the leader's role. For instance, individuals from non-western cultures may resist the formal position of leader but be willing to lead from an informal position within the organization. In addition, gender may play a role in whether an individual volunteers to lead or needs the affirmation of having the position formally bestowed through request or election.

The interviews conducted as part of this study created an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their past actions as leaders. The participants recounted feelings and actions of authenticity that they felt were important to their development of their leader identities. Future development programs should continue to foster the development of authenticity through character development programs. In addition, young leaders should be taught to reflect to find meaning in experiences to reinforce learning and development.

Supervisor/Manager development

Since participants learned to lead from following the example of other leaders and through relationships, practitioners should develop training programs for mentors and authority figures to strengthen the developmental opportunities for emerging leaders. The supervisors and managers could benefit from understanding how to more effectively mentor the next generation of leaders. For example, a development program for the supervisors and managers should include knowledge of how different cultures and genders may identify themselves as leaders. In addition, supervisors and managers should be included when designing the leader development interventions for young adults so as to incorporate meaningful goal setting and decision making opportunities.

<div align="center">

Conclusions

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This study contributes to the field of HRD in several ways. First, the model of leader identity develop fills a void in the HRD literature with respect to leadership development of the next generation of leaders. Identity development is an outcome based on the experiences that affirmed, validated, and challenged the young adult leaders in this study. The experiences placed the participants in situations where they called upon personal character values to guide their actions.

This study also answers the call of Hill et al. (2013) for HRD to broaden its perspective of workforce development for the 21st Century. Specifically, the dynamic nature of the participants' relationships provided the opportunity for the leaders to develop skills that are transferable to the workplace, including how to successfully interact with diverse groups of people. However, affirmation and validation were not always enough to encourage participants to volunteer for future leadership roles. Findings suggest that even the participants who were not willing to volunteer for future leadership positions possessed the foundational skills to lead with encouragement from others. Factors such as culture, the quality of the relationships with the authority figures, individual motive, or developmental contexts may have contributed to the differences in leader identity development.

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Bios

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of practice).

Table 1.

Summary of Participant Information

Name	Age	M/F	Ethnicity	Venue of Practice	Leader Position Senior Year
Ava	20	F	Caucasian	Drill Team Church Youth	Captain Informal participation
Ben	18	M	Hispanic	Cross Country Spanish Club NHS	Senior Captain Treasurer Treasurer
Beth	19	F	Caucasian	Band	Co-Drum Major
Bob	19	M	Caucasian	Swim	Senior Captain MVP
Chip	20	M	Caucasian	Band	Co-Drum Major
Joan	19	F	African American	Basketball Student Council Church Mentor Program	Co-Captain President Informal participation Executive Mentor
Kip	20	M	Caucasian	Band Church Youth Leadership Conf. NHS Senior Class Student Council Youth & Gov.	Drum Major Informal participation Founder President Vice President President Vice President
Lisa	18	F	Caucasian	Choir Mentor Program Church Youth	President Executive Mentor Informal participation
Lyn	18	F	African American/ Caucasian	Mentor Program	Lead Executive Mentor
Tim	18	M	Caucasian	Soccer	Co-Captain

Figure 1. Model of Identity Development for Leaders who Lead by Example