Special Issue on New Paradigms in Evaluating Leadership Development

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Abstract

The Problem.
Evaluation of leadership development programs has been criticized recently for being based too much on structured evaluation models that do not account for more broad based outcomes and interpretations of leadership development.

The Solution.
This special issue develops some core themes around enabling and enacting leadership development evaluation in organizations. The focus is on highlighting innovative ways of evaluating leadership development that fits more comfortably with contemporary leadership theory. This link with contemporary leadership literature, in turn, brings about thinking around mindsets, culture, partnerships, relationships, and the interdependency of leaders and leadership in organizations, some of the core themes represented in this special issue. These themes are expressed as new paradigms as there appears limited discussion in the literature regarding their use in evaluating leadership development. The purpose of the special issue will be to highlight differing and innovative approaches to leadership development evaluation rooted in experiences of delivering such programs in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Each article expresses novel approaches to the evaluation of leadership programs that can be inculcated into practice across a wide variety of organizations.

The Stakeholders.
Leadership development programs have started to become prolific in organizations both public and private sector based. This has provided a challenge to human resources...
resources professionals in the evaluation of such programs that are increasingly becoming complex in nature and starting to use innovative and unusual approaches. This special issue therefore delves into contemporary leadership theory and relates this to the practice of delivering and evaluating programs across organizations. The outcome therefore will help HR professionals identify key aspects to take account of when evaluating leadership development in and across organizations, and will set the basis for further empirical research and theoretical reflection on the topic.

Keywords
leadership development, learning and evaluation

The Evaluation of Leadership Development: An Overview

Over the past 10 to 15 years leadership development courses and programs have become increasingly popular. The idea of intervening to develop leadership ability is now considered to be within the mainstream of academic degrees in modern business schools (Gabriel, 2005; Gill, 2004). With this have come guidelines for best practice for leadership development (Burgoyne & Turnbull-James, 2001). More recent studies have explored the experiential nature of leadership learning (e.g., Kempster, 2006; Lowe & Gardner, 2000; McCall, 2004; Stead & Elliott, 2009; Waldman, Keller, & Berson, 2006) and the development of leadership practice from a relational, social, and situated perspective through a process of becoming (e.g., Cunliffe, 2009; Kempster & Stewart, 2010). Furthermore, leadership learning and development initiatives have also become increasingly more creative and innovative. For example there are more alternative and critical approaches to leadership development and learning (see Edwards, Elliott, Iszatt-White, & Schedlitzki, forthcoming, 2013), a perspective of leadership development as building social capital (e.g., McCallum & O’Connell, 2009) and critical interpretations of and in leadership development and learning (Ford & Harding, 2007; Sinclair, 2007). Furthermore, the leadership literature is providing some innovative perspectives on leadership, among other areas, linking it to complexity (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007), to a relational perspective (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006), to anthropology and culture (e.g., Harter, 2006; Jones, 2005), and a distributed perspective (see Bolden, 2011, Edwards, 2011 and Thorpe, Gold, & Lawler, 2011 for reviews).

It seems however that the evaluation of such programs and learning interventions appears to be stalling behind such innovations in the literature. For example, Watkins, Lysø and deMarris (2011) have suggested that evaluation models of leadership development programs based on fixed objectives do not capture outcomes robustly enough. This special issue explores issues of leadership development evaluation in more depth and makes suggestions and gives examples of how the human resources profession can develop more rigorous approaches to leadership development evaluation.
Evaluation of leadership development has been conducted within the competency framework and has often therefore focused primarily on individual leadership development (e.g., Atwood, Mora, & Kaplan, 2010; Mann et al., 2008). Naquin and Holton (2006) argue that a competency-based approach to management and leadership development using assessment centres and on-the-job performance is the most effective way to evaluate. Tyson and Ward (2004) also use a competency-based approach, but recognise the significance of organizational context in their study. Their evaluation methodology builds on the measurement of competencies to take into account the differing stakeholder needs within the organization. Others have also refined the basic competency measurement idea. Martineau (2004), for example, refines it by levels (individual, team, and organization) and also by levels of mastery. These methods all have utility and provide useful data for measuring individual behavioural progress against a template designed for their organizations.

In a special issue of Academy of Management Executive on leadership development, however, Raelin (2004) criticizes the long term over-reliance on the competency movement for both the design and evaluation of leadership development programs, arguing that most training providers have either an implicit list of attributes in mind of what it takes to be a good leader, and design their programs on this basis. Raelin has argued that by using alternative lenses to conceptualize leadership and the purpose of development we can envisage new forms of development and evaluation of development. This means that evaluators of leadership development programs can gain a more insightful and rigorous understanding of the impact of programs at the individual, group, and particularly the organizational level. Since this special issue, there have been a growing number of examples of leadership development evaluation that consider context, culture, history and time, and a growing interest in adopting an ethnographic methodology for the evaluation of leadership development (see Hannum, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2007 for a review). Hannum et al. (2007) also point to an over-emphasis on individually focused leadership development, assessed and evaluated using 360—degree instruments, and note much fewer techniques for researching and evaluating collective leadership. Their handbook cites specific program examples to illustrate the impact of context on leadership development. In a program focusing on social justice and social change, Collins and Hopson (2007), for example, adopted a mixed method methodology inspired by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to identify impact and outcomes of leadership development at individual, organizational, and community levels. This methodology identifies evaluation in five differing elements of a program—resources/inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. From the perspective of the special issue, however, we would suggest that this model is too linear and although it has the potential to capture information over a period of time, it is questionable the level to which it captures contextually related information. The importance of local context is also highlighted by Peters and Baum (2007), they refer specifically to the role of direct supervision and the organizational HR systems of the organization and its effects on leadership development. Most of Hannum et al. (2007)’s examples, however, have been undertaken within innovative community leadership
projects. We propose that more widespread attention to context through differing new paradigms discussed in the special issue will enhance our understanding of leadership development impact and outcomes in multiple contexts. Although Hannum et al. mention social network analysis and ethnography as useful methods for the evaluation of collective leadership development, they also note that these ideas are still in their infancy, and call for more attention from evaluators to the potential role of such alternative methodologies.

Last, and most recently, Watkins et al. (2011) have taken up the challenge of identifying a more robust way of evaluating leadership development programs through the use of the theory of change model of evaluation (The Evaluation Forum, 2003). In this special issue, we continue on from the work of Watkins et al. and provide a number of alternative approaches to evaluating leadership development, and highlight case studies that provide a practical understanding of how these approaches can be enacted in organizations.

Article Descriptions

Each article in this special issue raises a discussion around alternative approaches to evaluating leadership development programs away from the competency and skills approaches highlighted above. For example the first article by Fiona Kennedy and colleagues from Auckland Business School challenges the orientation toward skill sets in leadership development evaluation and suggests more focus should be aimed at understanding the impact on mindsets in the leadership development process. Taking a relational (e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2006) and complexity theory (e.g., Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001) approach to develop an understanding of leadership mindset they develop a three-perspective orientation toward leadership development evaluation based on leadership for accountability, leadership for development, and leadership for knowledge.

The second article follows on nicely from the first in the sense of providing an in-depth case study of leadership development evaluation based on a relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and complexity (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) perspective and colleagues describe and evaluate a UK-based leadership development program for senior managers in adult social care organizations. They suggest that complexity theory can be used to articulate tensions in apparently contradictory forces requirements. This complexity focus could help to reconcile issues around the need and pressure to demonstrate impact and return on investment from leadership development programs.

The third article also takes note of the shifting pattern in the leadership literature and highlights a focus on culture and anthropology in the framing of leadership in organizations (e.g., Harter, 2006; Jones, 2005). From this focus on culture Gareth Edwards and Sharon Turnbull highlight five UK-based case studies of leadership development work that have taken a culture-based approach to evaluating outcomes and impact. They conclude that this broad perspective enables a wider and deeper appreciation of the impact of leadership development in and across organizations.
Following on from the third article, the fourth highlights an in-depth case study from the Canadian healthcare sector that suggests a way of building upon traditional competency approaches to leadership development evaluation is to create an appreciation of individual and contextual differences. The authors, Gina Grandy and Judith Holton, describe a collaborative process of program design, and delivery that involves all stakeholders, which describes leadership development from a social capital perspective (e.g., McCallum & O’Connell, 2009).

The final two articles develop themes around leadership development programs needing to appreciate both the leader and leadership within evaluation processes and link to notions of distributed leadership. Article five by Catherine McCauley-Smith and colleagues develop a discussion on the theme of leader and leadership from research that evaluated a leadership development program in the higher education sector in the United Kingdom. From their research they have identified a leadership development praxis that transcends the boundaries of conventional educational leadership by reemphasizing the benefits of bridging the gap between academic and practitioner perspectives on leadership and leadership development.

Article six by Byron Hanson from Curtin University also discusses this theme and has developed a model from research and the literature that helps to frame the interconnected nature of leadership. He suggests that the model enables leadership development evaluators to appreciate the whole system of leadership development that includes an interface between individuals and the organization involved in leadership development processes.

We believe this collection of articles provides some alternatives in leadership development evaluation both in theoretical and practical terms. We hope that academics and practitioners alike find the discussions and suggestions in this special issue useful.

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