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Connecting Values to Leader and Leadership Development

Abstract

This article explores values, leaders, and leadership development. It presents the distinction between a leader and leadership development, and offers insights into the role of values in both. Finally, a concise discussion of developmental readiness at the individual and organizational levels is presented.

Introduction

The shortcoming of many leadership development and leader development efforts in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors is the failure to inculcate values into the developmental process. Much emphasis is placed on the skills and competencies sought. Insufficient attention is put on the values – both individual and organizational – which influence the leader. There are individual values that are embedded and should be recognized and identified as they will consciously or unconsciously impact mental models and decisions. By the same token, organizational values should be explored in order to clarify and strengthen them. In both situations - individual and organizational ethical standards - leadership and leader development can be greatly enhanced by focusing on values.

This article explores methods for integrating values into leader and leadership development. It begins by making the distinction between leader development and leadership development. It then moves to explicating the importance of incorporating individual values into the developmental process. Next, the focus shifts to clarifying the role of organizational values in these efforts. Finally, there a brief exploration of developmental readiness is presented.

Clarity About What Is Meant By “Values”

Classic definitions of values include the contention that they are enduring personal characteristics that are acquired through processes of social analysis (Rokeach, 1973; Williams, 1968). Keeney (1994) enhances the classic conception of values by stating that values are “principles for evaluating the desirability of any possible alternatives or consequences.” Keeney adds to our understanding of values by stating that they serve to define all that a person cares about in a decision situation. This is not to suggest that values are fixed once they are embedded. They evolve and change with time. People evolve with experience and discover facets of the self as a result of that evolution (Ibarra, 2015).

Distinguishing Between Leader Development and Leadership Development

It is asserted that leader development concerns itself with the development of the individual, as an individual. It focuses on how leaders grow, evolve, and cultivate their capabilities. Mcauley and Van Velsor (2005) posit that it expands a person’s capacity in many realms. The implication is that leader development enables a person to be more than possibly envisioned or expected. While Day (2001) contends that this form of evolving is based on developing one’s abilities in relation to a formal role, I contend that leader development expands the person beyond his or her fixed position or stated title.

Leadership development addresses the skills and competencies that leaders in an organizational context must demonstrate. This display must be congruent with the organization's objectives. Just as leader development focuses on expanding the individual's ability, leadership development focuses on expanding leaders' ability within the context of their work. It involves broadening the organization's ability to generate the leadership required to accomplish its work (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2005). The objective is to enable individuals to build their strengths and use them within the organization to meet its goals (Day, 2001). The important distinction is that while leader development focuses on the individual, leadership development places the individual in a broader social and organizational environment (Hart et al., 2008).

Clarity about the context of both leader and leadership development is essential when formulating a clear approach. Context includes the organizational climate and culture, levels of understanding of organizational goals, intentions, and desire for personal growth. Additional elements of context include available feedback mechanisms. These may include 360° evaluations, formal and informal coaching opportunities, mentoring, and other methods for gathering data about the self.

Values in Leader Development

What difference do values make in both types of development? With respect to leader development, surfacing and exploring values is critical because it provides leaders with an awareness from which to operate more intentionally. Understanding that "leaders are defined by their values and their character," it becomes essential that they develop clarity on what those values are so that they can be intentionally asserted (George, 2003). According to Bruno and Lay (2008), values enable leaders to perceive not only appropriate ends, but also the means to those ends. They contend that an internalized value system becomes, consciously or subconsciously, a guide for actions. It is argued that personal values, ethics, and morals influence choices and behavior (Grojean et al., 2004).

If one agrees with these assertions about the power of values to guide behaviors, decision-making and action, then one would most probably agree that values must be exposed and explored throughout the leader development processes. The exploration of values can lead to what Stanley (2008) coins "congruent leadership." This form of leadership is evident when activities of the leader are driven by the leader's values and beliefs. Stanley (2008) enhances our understanding of congruent leadership by stating that it is rooted in values, beliefs, and principles that determine where a leader stands. I would add that these three factors may also have great influence on where a leader is going.

The surfacing of individual leader values is the beginning of a developmental process that is focused on understanding their importance. It should be noted that values exploration is a more pointed activity than simply guiding leaders in theoretically exploring nebulous concepts. In fact, according to Stanley (2008), "the leader's power and influence is derived from being able to articulate and display his/her values, beliefs, and principles." As a result, any process that seeks to discover values must provide enough depth and substance for the leader to become very clear on the roots and manifestations of the values guiding their actions. The process should include in-depth reflection, the exploration of the individual's life story, and dialogue about the things that surface through this in-depth exploration. Journaling may be a useful tool during values exploration.

How does the process of exploring values as a component of leader development begin? The process is initialized by helping the leader develop the capacity to reflect. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) assert that being reflective entails a willingness to consider what might be wrong with accepted, established ideas and beliefs – even with one’s own ideas and beliefs. This is not to say that developing reflective capacity is necessarily easy. Leaders can become trapped in what Alvesson, Blom, and Sveningsson (2017) call “functional stupidity.” This is the compliance with norms without asking whether it is the right thing to do. Other barriers to reflection include accepting a narrow definition of one’s roles, an overly strong orientation towards consensus, and limited time devoted to introspection. Developing a deep understanding of one’s values requires reflexive practice. This is the careful consideration of issues, the capacity to explore the self from multiple angles, and the willingness to switch positions to explore issues from a variety of angles. While this is not easy work, it is the work required to begin thoughtfully unearthing and clarifying one’s values.

The process of values exploration in leader development can be enhanced by delving into early experiences. Murphy and Johnson (2011) put forth a lifespan approach in understanding leader development. This approach brings forth the early experiences that, consciously or subconsciously, shape the leader. They hold that early experiences can influence identity. Avolio (2011) asks leaders to consider their own life streams and the impact that parents and others had on their ability to develop the efficacy to influence others. I further contend that early experiences profoundly impact the leader’s values. Life’s defining moments must be explored in the leader development process. Identifying many significant aspects of the life story, including pivot points that caused the leader to change directions or make life-course corrections, can enable core values to surface for examination.

Values in Leadership Development

In addressing the role of values in leadership development, it is crucial to recognize that leadership development concerns the leader’s ability to carve out a role in the organization; exploring values will entail identifying a clear organizational context. Contextual factors moderate the leader’s identity, future development, and effectiveness (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). The context of the organization includes its norms, culture, climate, and accepted leadership styles. The organization’s context also includes its explicit and implicit values. There are clearly stated values which may or may not be consistent with the values that exist on the subterranean level. It is often the implicit values that are the most powerful in guiding behavior in the organization. Both must be sufficiently identified to gain a true understanding of organizational context.

The surfacing of organizational values allows for those in the leadership development process to explore alignment between their own values and those of the organization. This can be a moment of truth. It is entirely possible that the individual’s values and those of the organization are incongruent. Ultimately the goal is for leaders to create alignment between their values and that of the organization, as well as the organizational practices that they undertake (Reave, 2005.) When those values include philanthropy, environmental protection, and civic engagement, leadership then impacts larger communities.

Just as reflection is important in leader development, it is *vital* in leadership development. The reflection alluded to earlier requires leaders to reflect on their actions. The leadership development process introduces a segment called “reflection-in-action” (Hedberg, 2017).

Whereas the reflection conducted in leader development can provide a template for the future, this form of “reflection while doing” allows the leader to transform actions in the midst of their occurrence thereby creating pathways for maximizing their impact in specific roles. These reflective procedures have the potential to stabilize the leader’s attention, focus directed energy on information processing, and raise awareness (Hedberg, 2017). This intentional movement away from automatic responses provides the leader with the opportunity to use a contemplative approach to enacting their roles. Further, using reflective practice to examine one’s position is useful in crises because it allows developing leaders to gain perspective and cope with stress (Reave, 2005). This practice is a useful tool as developing leaders continue to emerge in new roles that present taxing demands. It enables them to cultivate the self-discipline required to continuously question their values and how they incorporate them into their work.

The thorough exploration of values as a component of the leadership development process enables leaders to write (and rewrite, as this is an iterative, generative process) the script that they want to use to define themselves and their respective positions within the organization (Avolio, 2011). Leadership development creates space for leaders to be authors of their own roles rather than adopting a predetermined script. They build the strength to be creators and co-creators of organizational systems.

Surfacing values in leadership development allows leaders to consider key systemic questions (Avolio, 2011). These questions include: What systems will we transform? What systems will we transition? What systems will we abolish? Selecting and developing people who are able to use their positions to address fundamental systems change is critical as organizations emerge and pursue their futures. This requires that potential leaders be committed to learning. They must not bluff or freeze when they are uncertain; they must use those unfamiliar and often uncomfortable moments to actively seek knowledge (Meadows, 2008). This orientation towards learning fosters the development of what Thomas (2008) calls a “personal learning strategy.” This strategy revolves around having a leadership development framework that builds heightened awareness of the person’s aspirations, motivations, values, and learning style.

Developmental Readiness

Whether undertaking leader development or leadership development, it is important that the organization create a framework for deciding who is ready to embark upon a developmental journey. While this is an area in need of further research as a clear methodology is not readily apparent (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), the next several lines explore the concept of developmental readiness and its relationship to values. The term, as it is articulated by Avolio (2011), implies that a person is oriented towards or has the motivation to lead and learn. This means that they want to influence others and understand that their own learning is a component of them being able to have an effect on individuals or organizational systems.

Beginning with the individual’s developmental readiness, Avolio and Hannah (2008), contend that the person must have self-awareness. They hold that this awareness promotes developmental readiness. I contend that an unstated though essential component of that awareness is values clarity. Entering a developmental process with some degree of self-knowledge regarding one’s values provides the person with a foundation upon which to begin delving more deeply into the self and the roles enacted as a leader. Self-concept clarity,

another component of developmental readiness, addresses the leader's confidence in him or herself (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). A level of clarity in this arena enables leaders to face new experiences with some degree of surety. Also implicit in this is that the leaders will be confident in their ability to learn. A learning goal orientation is another of the components of developmental readiness (Avolio, 2011). This is a shift from a focus on task accomplishment to a focus on intellectual curiosity, learning, and growth.

Concerning organizational readiness, I believe that organizational values must be identified and made explicit before beginning any developmental activity. Just as self-awareness is essential for developmentally-ready individuals, organizational awareness is also keenly important. This awareness can happen through climate studies, organizational culture analyses, and other discussions that make the invisible visible. Exploring organizational values before embarking on the design of developmental experiences enhances the likelihood of alignment.

Avolio and Hannah (2008) hold that it is important to enhance the organization's climate to support development. They advocate for the creation of environments that are strengths-based and promote optimism and inquiry into possibilities for the future. They further hold that this creates a climate where individuals can discover their potential. Creating this type of organization calls for a cascade of positive interactions between leaders and followers. It is this interaction that creates a positive culture and climate.

Summary

With respect to leader development where the focus is on the individual, the process of values exploration is linked to building reflective practice. This practice is an inward exploration which occurs while shaping leaders. It becomes more action-oriented when developing leadership. It provides a context for assessing and recalibrating while leading. In both cases, reflective practice is essential.

Leader development and leadership development are enhanced by focusing on values. This important exploration enables clarity and authenticity to emerge in developmentally ready leaders. Just as leaders must be developmentally ready, so too must the organizations in which they will function. Organizational values must be made clear before beginning the work to design developmental interventions.

The facets of developmental readiness include individual readiness as evidenced through self-awareness, self-concept clarity, and an inclination towards learning. Organizational readiness is often found in cultures that focus on strengths. It is also evident when organization's have identified key elements of their climate and culture. Just as individuals must have clear self-concepts, so must organizations.

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Joanne L. Smikle is on the faculty of the Department of Leadership and Management at Saybrook University. She has extensive experience consulting with organizations interested in enhancing organizational effectiveness through developing leadership competence and strategic clarity. A scholar-practitioner, Joanne is inquisitive about leadership and organization development.

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