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Lessons *for* Experience: Why Wait?

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In highlighting the value of experience in leadership development, McCall (2010) describes the 70-20-10 rule, in which challenging assignments contribute the most to leadership development and formal programs contribute the least. This conclusion about the impact of educational programs significantly minimizes their value and indicates that education is currently underperforming in terms of developing effective leaders. Challenging this view, we suggest that educational programs, and specifically postsecondary education, could have a stronger contribution to this formula and, with some deliberate changes could significantly alter the impact education has on overall leadership development.

From our perspective, education provides lessons *for* experience in which future leaders learn about leadership prior to their entry into the actual work environment. This type of learning is proactive about leadership development; that is, it prepares future leaders with information about predictable and identifiable leadership, and primes current students to more clearly frame the leadership situation, to work effectively within it, and to consider both short- and long-term implications of their decisions and actions. These preparatory lessons could be critical antecedent factors that distinguish leaders that thrive, excel, have accelerated development, and successfully emerge following stretch assignments from those who don't. This enhanced emphasis on education doesn't dispute McCall's recognition of the value of experience, rather, it complements it by extending the factors that contribute to leadership effectiveness to earlier education. Thus, the lessons *for* experience create receptiveness to and augment the value drawn from the lessons *from* experience. Lessons *for* experience better prepare leaders for a future, yet undeclared and undefined, leadership situation.

Maximizing the value of education for future leadership effectiveness will require a reorientation of leadership education. Presently, this value is diminished for a number of understandable reasons. A central reason is the natural lag time between commencement of the educational experience and assumption of a leadership position. Many years separate future leaders from leadership positions, masking the potential benefit of early leadership education. Not only can academic education be distant, it may also be seen as a constant. Every leader has a generally similar educational background—they complete a secondary and postsecondary education that enhances their general fund of knowledge, critical thinking skills, writing ability, and other academically related skills. In addition, until relatively recently, undergraduate and graduate degree programs didn't offer much coursework on leadership except for those pursuing research-based degrees.

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Thus, the gulf between the study of leadership and the practice of leadership has been rather wide.

Academic preparation can help bridge the theory–application gap by providing basic classroom education in combination with lab experiences. Interestingly, the work environment can seem like the lab experience without the guiding theoretical material. Without this guidance, the work lab may be experienced as a fairly random and trial-by-error situation or one that is guided by opinions and biases rather than a more controlled environment influenced by known best practices and optimal frameworks. Conceptual tools developed from specific academic preparation can have considerable value weeks or years later when that leader is practicing within the laboratory environment of the work setting. Furthermore, academic preparation may actually extend the talent pool of available leaders. Typical estimates of leadership incompetence are around 50%. Early leadership education could improve this figure and correspondingly decrease the likelihood of leader derailment.

McCall offers seven sure bets regarding experience as a crucial teacher about leadership. Using an earlier entry point, we offer five sure bets on the actual teaching of leadership. Specific coursework prior to assuming a leadership role could be a significant catalyst for what Avolio and Hannah (2008) describe as accelerating leadership development. That said, the value of the academic experience may actually be dormant for years.

Challenge the Great Man Theory of Leadership and Its Implications

Although emerging evidence is making it clear that leaders aren't just born, acceptance that leadership can be developed doesn't yet have full traction. Clearly this is an impediment for leadership courses, and definitely is a barrier for those who believe that leadership ability is innate. As an example, Foster and Lindsay (2008) found the belief that leadership is a fixed entity was negatively correlated with mastery goals, effort, and intrinsic motivation toward a leadership course. Without any modification to fixed beliefs about leadership, not only are students who hold this belief likely to be less enjoyable in the classroom, more importantly they are unlikely to learn much that can be applied later, and they are similarly unlikely to be primed to look for or profit from any leadership development experiences that come their way.

Fortunately, the classroom provides an opportunity to evaluate leadership beliefs in light of evidence, including results indicating that leaders are strongly influenced by ''nurture.'' Although this evidence may not shift everyone's convictions, it is certainly data that are hard to ignore. These data could be used with motivational interviewing techniques in the classroom, that promote shifts in thinking and behavior not by directly confronting resistant beliefs but by examining the advantages and disadvantages of reaching the conclusions they have reached. Class discussions can reveal that beliefs that leadership ability can't change limit leadership for all but the exceptionally talented. In addition, Socratic questions about the components of effective leadership can lead students to see that leadership, to a degree, is composed of certain skills or competencies that are enacted. Because it is possible to learn other skills (ranging from golf to empathy), it would certainly be possible to learn leadership skills. Collectively, this information and learning approach can shape future leaders' attitudes regarding the developmental aspects of leadership.

Make Assessment and Feedback a Core Part of the Academic Course

Self-awareness is commonly regarded as a fundamental requirement of leaders. This is reflected in the popularity and value of 360-degree feedback assessments. The formal impetus for self-awareness, however, tends to occur at some juncture in the work environment—a transition to a higher level position or expressed concerns about derailment tendencies. Arguably this kind of

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feedback, although better late than never, is nonetheless late. By this time, leaders are fairly entrenched in their styles and absorbed in the day-to-day demands of work. It would be prudent to promote self-awareness at a much earlier time. Embedding assessment in an academic leadership course can help future leaders learn about their tendencies and associated strengths prior to assuming formal positions that involve influencing and leading others. A number of relevant assessments are online and in the public domain and can easily be incorporated into lessons on leadership competencies, personality and leadership, emotional intelligence, and derailment.

Although feedback is very valuable for understanding oneself, it is also a great opportunity to learn about others. Feedback is typically presented in a normative fashion, enabling the recipient to observe the magnitude of a particular characteristic relative to others. The chance to see whether one is at, above, or below a mean value provides valuable insight into how others are and how one operates in the context of similar or dissimilar others. This can help dispel the false consensus phenomenon (the tendency to overestimate how similar one is to others). This bias can be particularly detrimental in the leadership context, that relies on the ability to work effectively with others who might have quite different work ethics, social styles, problem-solving capacity, energy level, change orientation, and so on.

Show How Effectiveness as a Leader Requires Different Skills Than Does Effectiveness as an Individual Contributor

Typically, development in the U.S. educational system is about individual achievement. As a result, by the time one becomes a leader, he or she has a lot of experience in an individual contributor role. This can create a significant leadership challenge because leadership is about getting results through others. It is often the technical competence of the individual contributor that propels them into a leadership role, despite the fact that the technical competencies may have very little overlap with leadership competencies. Thus, it isn't too surprising that the rate of leadership incompetence is as high as it is.

To apply an early prevention strategy to this problem, formal coursework could set the stage for future leaders by exploring the stages of organizational leadership. Such instruction provides a cognitive framework for understanding and recognizing that leadership is not a ''one size fits all'' enterprise and that ongoing leadership development is required for leadership effectiveness at varying levels of the organization. To prompt an appreciation of the frontline leadership role as distinct from the individual contributor role, academic assignments in leadership coursework can include team projects involving deliverables and consequences for the quality of products and performance. Assignments can range from team-based papers to marketing type presentations in which only one team can earn the ''A'' contract.

Provide Experience in and Mental Models for Effective Team Leadership

Leaders are often so focused on execution and short-term success that they too heavily rely on compliance-based and transactional leadership styles. They don't recognize or don't know to apply other approaches to get the best, over time, from their current personnel. However, this knowledge can be implanted early on by orienting future leaders to leadership models related to transformational leadership, ideas about how to elicit motivation from subordinates, about the effect of leader–member exchange and the organizational impact of the quality of the supervisory relationships, and about organizational citizenship behaviors and the contributions these ''extra role'' behaviors have on leadership and organizational effectiveness. These concepts provide useful mental models for future leaders about tactical methods for

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achieving organizational objectives, meaningfully organizing competing demands, and optimizing critical talent in a high tempo work environment.

Teach Systems Thinking

A common problem in organizations is the tendency to operate in narrow stovepipes with the typical leader progressing up a particular silo. Ultimately, experience might help the leader to think in terms of tradeoffs, synergies, and sustainability, but such learning is generally not systematic and the leader needs to be developmentally ready—to have ''both the ability and motivation to attend to, make meaning of, and appropriate new knowledge into one's long-term memory structures'' (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, p. 336). Providing future leaders with academic material related to both systems thinking and strategic thinking can implant the right knowledge into these long-term memory structures for later retrieval. Case studies that compare and contrast outcomes of systemic versus narrow thinking and strategic versus tactical decisions can be used to highlight this point. Such learning primes future leaders to recognize and recall learning related to enterprise-wide thinking, boundary spanning, deliberate change, and prioritization for the future.

Academic learning is an experience. However, academic learning (lessons *for* experience) is different from learning from experience in an organization in several important ways. First, in an academic setting, lessons can be provided for a wide but general audience, whereas lessons from experience (e.g., challenging assignments) target a limited player pool. Second, academic experiences can be deliberately designed in advance to accomplish specific objectives. Obviously not all experiences can be designed (e.g., hardships), and moreover, as McCall notes, learning objectives are rarely attached to many experiences. Third, because organizations have multiple, competing objectives, leaders may be rewarded for pursuing performance objectives that interfere with learning objectives. In an academic environment, the learning objectives are primary and can be directly mapped onto the rewards. Finally, although both lessons *for* experience and lessons *from* experience require a leader to be receptive to learning, because of the multitasking that occurs in organizations, in these settings it may be more difficult to facilitate not only the right takeaway messages but any learning at all. In an academic environment, the nature of a grading system, especially if it is properly tied to course objectives, at least creates some extrinsic motivation to process critical leadership information and related learning.

In conclusion, leadership development can be primed through deliberate academic experiences. The lessons *for* experience equip future leaders with a mental model about leadership in the organizational environment, increasing their potential to lead in ways that are academically supported best practices. These lessons *for* experience certainly complement lessons to be derived *from* experience, and they may increase both the readiness and the capacity to draw vital information from experience.

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