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Putting the Development Into Experiential Development

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Although McCall's *sure bets* are helpful for moving leadership development beyond a competency-driven mixture of rote HR interventions, simply relying on experience alone to develop leaders is a costly gamble. We argue experiences, in and of themselves, do not promote effective leadership as much as the *meaning* that individuals infer from such events; meaning that more directly shapes leaders' active analysis and future use of such prior experiences. Although a step in the right direction, McCall's experiential approach fails to weigh the importance of reflection on events and offers limited strategies to assist in the requisite facilitation of such reflection in an organizational setting. In contrast but not contradiction, we argue that for an experiential approach to promote effective leadership, leaders must engage in a structured reflection process to facilitate transfer of lessons learned into day-to-day leadership activities. Thus, the aims of this commentary are to, describe why extracting meaning from experiences is the key to making experiential development, well, *developmental*. Following from this, we offer specific strategies, based on guided reflection techniques, to accomplish this task in organizational settings.

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Extracting Meaning From Experiences

Personal meaning drawn from experiences is important for at least two key aspects of leadership: (a) sensemaking used in problem solving and (b) communicating and identifying with followers. The sensemaking literature suggests leaders use their experiences as a framework to understand and solve complex problems they encounter. Leaders, like most individuals, apply a cognitive representational system (i.e., mental model) to make sense of causal variables when solving problems (Waples, Shelton, & Clinton, 2009). Thus, these cognitive representations act as a heuristic device during sensemaking (Keller, 2003), and they are particularly needed to understand situations that are complex and ill-defined. Where effective leaders differ is that they are able to move beyond a *description* of problems they encounter to the *prescription* of what should be done and how to get there (Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; Mumford, Friedrich, & Caughron, 2007; Mumford & Strange, 2002, 2005; Waples, Shelton, & Clinton, 2009).

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This framework of leadership sensemaking holds that prescriptive mental models arise from reflection on and analysis of current problems in terms of their personal history and experiences, with particular emphasis on the integrative themes arising from the meaning that leaders extracted from experiences (Strange & Mumford, 2005). This coherent pattern of events has been described as the *life narrative* by developmental scholars (McAdams, 2001, 2006; Pillemer, 2001). These integrated sequences of salient, emotionally evocative experiences and their understood meaning may be used to shape the self-constructs and, more importantly, the mental models that individuals use to make sense of problems they confront (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Ligon, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008).

Personal meaning is also important to leadership in that this meaning plays a key role in identification with followers. That is, life narratives provide a vehicle for people to communicate personal understanding of their lives in reference to the current situation (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1995; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Conveying meaning through life narratives fosters identification from followers, providing a basis for common understanding that permits more automatic, intuitive social interaction between followers and leaders (Keller, 2003; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Leaders convey their beliefs, values, and expectations through storytelling—often relating personal meaning they have inferred from past experiences, which likely promotes similar followers' identification and commitment to them and to their objectives (Simmons, 2002).

Given that extracting and using the meaning from experiences is essential for at least these two key functions of leadership, McCall's approach would appear somewhat limited. Although providing experiences is certainly an important start, there is much evidence to suggest that most leaders do not naturally extract meaning from those experiences on their own. Literature on metacognition, or *thinking about thinking*, suggests that this is an individual difference, and people vary in their capability to reflect on what they experience (Metcalf & Shimamura, 1994). McCall's (2010) suggestion (similar to Avolio & Hannah's, 2008) is to select individuals who already possess this metacognitive capacity for inclusion in experiential development programs. Although this is of course preferable, it may not always be possible—particularly if working with a succession planning scheme in which some high-potential individuals may be younger and less sophisticated in reflective processes.

Other research suggests that environmental demands may also preclude individuals from extracting meaning from experiences in a coherent way. Research on cognitive capacity, moreover, suggests that as complexity increases, a person's resources for reflecting on events may be negatively impacted. Reflect back to McCall's discussion of busy leaders, whereupon first interviewing executives he noted, ''it was a challenge for them even to remember what they had done in the previous 2 weeks, given the relentless pace and performance pressure of the executive job.'' The author was encouraged that after a few weeks of his questions, ''what, if anything have you learned?'' managers began to attend to the content of such experiences in a more purposeful manner. Thus, it would appear that this guided introspection was a particularly important step in the successful use of the experiential approach to leadership development.

A Strategy to Promote Reflection in Organizations: Guided Questioning Process

In sum, reflecting on experiences to extract meaning is important, and it is often the case that some—if not most—individuals will *not* naturally do this on their own. This begs the question, what can we do to assist managers to get more out of their experiences? Although McCall noted that experiences can be enhanced by ''adding known elements to them,'' we lack clear direction as to what these specific elements

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or strategies are for promoting the transfer of learning to subsequent leadership activities.

One strategy to bridge the gap between the desired learning objectives (e.g., effectively solving problems in future product development operations) and on-the-job experiences (e.g., job rotation to R&D) can be found in Shamir and Eilam's (2005) article on the development of authentic leadership. Specifically, the authors promote a planful approach to guided reflection and introspection to facilitate leaders actively analyzing ''trigger'' events they encounter. Before turning to a more in-depth discussion of strategies for guided reflection on these events, however, it is critical to note that not all experiences are equal. There are certain characteristics of events that allow for more lessons learned, more coherent integrative themes, and increased personal meaning than others.

In a recent historiometric study of 120 outstanding leaders, for example, we found evidence that certain types of leadership styles were associated with greater or lesser occurrences of these events (Ligon et al., 2008). Punitive, self-centered leaders (personalized) were more likely to experience events that they viewed as humiliating and even denigrating early in their careers—these *contaminating events* may have led them to shape certain expectancies (e.g., mistrust and object relations) about others in the workplace, which might have later influenced how they dealt with their own teams. However, socialized leaders had more experiences with *redemptive events*—experiences although perceived negative when they occurred eventually had positive outcomes associated with them. This perhaps helped them confront future challenges with a positive outlook—an expectation for the best in themselves and in others. In addition, we found that more productive leaders experienced events that had integrative narrative themes such as problem focus, emphasis on analysis, and focus on constraints. This suggests that the more leaders can experience events that test their analysis skills, the more likely they are to solve problems effectively, and creatively, in future situations.

The methodology used in this and other life narrative studies (e.g., McAdams, 2006) were retrospective, and thus the occurrences of these events in leaders' lives were unlikely to have been carefully orchestrated to develop certain organizational capabilities, as McCall champions. Attending to the underlying psychological properties of events that are related to desirable (and sometimes undesirable) leadership styles and performance yields specific techniques to employ when working with leaders on guided reflection, however. Although asking leaders ''what they have learned from various experiences'' does at least insure some degree of digestion and reflection, guided questioning to focus attention on specific developmental properties associated with leader success may be a useful lynchpin between experiences and development.

McCall suggests implementing the role of a ''wise counselor'' to guide executives through developmental experiences. Relying on such a position, we suggest that this individual use a *guided question technique* to lead executives through metacognition and reflection, helping them to frame experiences and events around those properties that have been found to be most fruitful for developing leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Although there are likely multiple types of events in addition to those found in our review of outstanding leaders (Ligon et al., 2008), the two characteristics that hold the most immediate promise considering our results are (a) redemptive themes (i.e., events that were seemingly negative and later associated with positive outcomes) and (b) problem focus (i.e., events reflecting the importance of problem-solving techniques such as problem finding, idea evaluation, and solution implementation). Helping leaders attend to these developmental aspects of experiences will increase focus on what is important about what they have encountered and on what will ultimately be needed for increased leadership. For example, after a leader experiences

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failure in a role, it may prove helpful to use the framework of a *redemptive event* in guided questioning:

- *Example redemptive event probe (McAdams, 2001)*: Assuming responsibility for the team that was failing likely had some immediate negative consequences. Can you describe those? What positive implications can you see this event having on your leadership style for the future? What did you learn about yourself during this experience? How has this experience shaped the strategies you will use when tackling tough people issues on future teams?

Focusing on problem analysis and constraints has also been linked to leader performance (Ligon et al., 2008). For example, an array of problem analysis probes may teach leaders to work through ambiguous information in a more systematic fashion:

- *Example problem identification (Okuda, Runco, & Berger, 1991) and information gathering (Qin & Simon, 1990) probes:* Reflect on the most challenging problem you experienced while in this rotation. What information did you find most helpful in understanding the parameters of the initial problem? In retrospect, what information would have helped you to understand the nature of the problem more explicitly? How could you have obtained this information? What will you do differently in the future?
- *Example idea evaluation probes (Wood, 2009)*: What elements of your plan were received well by stakeholders in the organization? What pushback did you hear about your idea? What could you have done more of, less of, or differently to anticipate these reactions?
- *Example implementation appraisal probes (Howell & Higgins, 1988)*: What resources were most helpful in getting your plan accepted in the organization? Which resources did not pan out—in other words, which people were least helpful in obtaining support for your plan? What were steps you took to find champions for your idea? What will you do more of, less of, or differently in the future?

In sum, it is possible to facilitate both the learning that occurs in experiential programs as well as the transfer of skills to future leadership situations. By taking advantage of what we know about how successful leaders think when solving problems, we can help *shape* how these experiences *shape* our leaders. Practical implications of McCall's call to action on experiential development are timely; in today's economic climate, it is less likely that we will be able to invest in lengthy and complex leadership development systems. However, by taking advantage of what the organizational environment affords us (i.e., real-time experiences fraught with complexity, challenge, and ambiguity), increasing our emphasis on reflection on the meaning of those experiences, and by structuring a guided questioning process to elicit focused introspection, we may indeed be able to recast leadership development.

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