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Grounding Leader Development: Cultural Perspectives

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We support McCall's (2010) thesis but use a cultural lens to focus on the limitations of his arguments from three perspectives. First, we agree that experience is beneficial but have to disagree with his assertion that ''there really is no need to do more research'' on how ''certain experiences matter more than others.'' Second, we endorse McCall's acknowledgement that ''it is the framework for understanding the lessons of those experiences, however, that has the most potential for helping people think through their own development.'' But we caution that cross-national studies introduce additional leadership lessons to be learned—possibly not just by managers in the country or region where the study was implemented but by business leaders in other parts of the world. Lastly, McCall suggests that the key return on experience is in ''the long-term impact of higher quality leadership talent on organizational performance.'' But in our view, he stops short of providing feasible options for translating experiences into higher quality leadership. So we propose an alternate way of embedding the transfer of leadership learning within the culture of organizations.

Two assumptions guide our commentary: (a) Given the reality of today's expanding global business activity, the experiences and lessons learned by managers in organizations that are neither United States nor Western European in origin cannot be ignored. (b) There is an immense need to accelerate leadership development, and this calls for out-of-the box thinking about the transmission of leadership knowledge within organizations.

Experience as a Driver for Leader Development: Findings From Asia

In 2006, the Center for Creative Leadership embarked on a series of studies on leadership development in Asia, replicating McCall's study of managers in the United States (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). All the interviews were conducted in country-based or homegrown organizations. As in the original research, the studies in India, China, and Singapore also revealed the same five broad categories of experience: challenging assignments, developmental relationships, hardships, coursework and training, and personal experience. But cross-country comparisons, which included data from the United States, showed that the event categories are weighted differently, new event types emerge, and other event types are absent (Yip & Wilson, 2010). Rather than providing clear-cut solutions about leadership development, the findings provoked us into asking further questions.

The examples of differences in country-based findings are numerous, and several are noted for illustrative purposes.

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- Hardships include crisis, work-related mistakes, career setbacks, and ethical dilemmas. The types of experiences categorized as ''hardships'' are cited less frequently in India and Singapore than in the United States. Do managers genuinely experience fewer hardships in some countries? Does that mean that leaders from those countries are less likely to learn the unique lessons produced by hardships?
- In our research with public service leaders in Singapore, we found that managers developed a ''network mindset'' through a combination of systematic rotations across government departments and work attachments in the community and with private sector organizations (Yip & Wilson, 2008). This type of learning was not found in earlier research on private-sector leaders and is an example of how learning from experience is structured differently across cultures and sectors. What can we learn from studying different models of how experience-based learning is structured?
- In the study of Indian executives, we found that familial relationships—such as with parents, uncles, and cousins—are cited more frequently as sources of leadership learning than is the case with executives from other countries. This could be reflective of a culture higher in collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Our current models of leader development draw primarily on the experiences of senior executives from United States and Western European corporations. Does the use of individualism as a tacit frame of reference for current research truncate a more complete understanding of leader development?
- Bosses are cited far less frequently by Chinese managers than managers from other countries. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the role of the boss is changing. At the same time, the country of China is in transition. So, younger managers may not look to their bosses for leadership learning. If this is valid, given what we know about the central role of bosses in leader development, what are the implications for practice?

The point to note is that we concur with McCall's central thesis and lament that research knowledge about leader development is not more widely applied. Nevertheless, the bid to utilize research findings to prepare managers for future leadership responsibility must take into account the varieties of contexts within which leader development occurs. Challenging assignments may be the primary source of leadership learning for the populations of managers participating in previous and current research. But what can today's global human resource professionals and line managers do when working with managers whose leadership practices are governed, for example, by the strong influence of their parents or early life hardships?

Lessons Learned: Paying Attention to Variations

The cross-study comparisons show that the pattern of lessons learned from the same event can be different too. For example, from bosses who are role models, ''accountability'' is the most frequently described lesson learned by Singapore's public service leaders, ''managing and motivating subordinates'' by Indian business executives, and ''management values'' by senior Chinese business leaders (Wilson, 2008; Yip & Wilson, 2008; Zhang, Chandrasekar, & Wei, 2009). As another example, from mistakes, the lesson most frequently mentioned by United States managers is learning about themselves; but managers from India and China report learning about executing an assignment and paying attention to details (Van Velsor, Wilson, Wei, & Criswell, 2009).

Overall, the in-depth review of the interview data also brought forth that there are a few leadership lessons that are notably more valued by managers from the Asian countries in which the studies

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were conducted, for example, humanizing management (India and China), establishing systems and regulations (China), and creating synergy among stakeholders (Singapore and India).

This affords us our second perspective: Managers need concrete insights about what they need to learn to succeed in their business environment. Without situation-specific knowledge, they will not know what lessons to extract from their experiences, and this will stymie their efforts at self-development. Similarly, those responsible for leader development need a working knowledge of possible variations concerning what leadership learning will be most useful in a particular context.

To summarize, our findings show that cultural context matters; yet, we are able to only raise questions rather than clearly explain how cultural variation in experiences and lessons learned would impact leader development interventions. This is the knowledge that human resource professionals and line managers need to provide appropriate experiences and steer managers toward learning necessary lessons. The implications are immense for how global organizations use experiences to orchestrate leader development in different parts of the world.

McCall, in his assessment of the gap between research and practice, suggests that human resource professionals and line executives have unwittingly stood in the way of organizations implementing new and improved leader development practices. But this is a limited view of why organizational practices have not advanced sufficiently. Believing that there is ''nothing as practical as a good theory'' (Lewin, 1952, p. 169), we suggest that research too has failed to deliver theoretical and practical insights that are sophisticated and yet simple enough to be valuable to practitioners.

Enhancing the Transfer of Lessons Learned From Experience

McCall notes that ''there is no substitute for educating developing leaders on how to take responsibility for their own development.'' Perhaps as a safeguard, he advocates that the new role of ''wise counselor'' be created. This credible and knowledgeable person's job is to pay attention to people, their developmental needs, organizational opportunities for learning from experience, and track that with business strategy.

His recommendations locate the responsibility for leadership learning in individuals—the managers themselves and wise counselors. In contrast, we think that the task of cascading leadership learning through the organization is too important to be vested in individuals. We propose that the HR or learning function take responsibility for transfer—amplifying individual leadership learning to benefit the work group and organization.

Research shows that very often managers do not carry over facts and principles they acquire in one context into other contexts (Stata, 1989). Learning tends to get glued to the narrow circumstances of a particular experience. Organizations need to be intentional about the transfer of learning to help managers make the connections they otherwise might not make.

The literature on the transfer of learning focuses primarily on the transfer at the individual level, but the organizational need is for transfer of learning at several levels—not just on the manager's application of the lessons learned but also the transmission of lesson knowledge to other people in the organization (Dixon, 2000). We suggest that this can occur at three levels:

- At the individual level, the lessons learned are transferred to the context of other work required of the manager. This takes place when a manager can apply the lessons learned from a particular experience to a variety of contexts, from one role to another, or in another organization or culture.
- At the group level, the lessons learned from experience can be transferred to others through conversations in which a group reflects collectively on

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an experience or when an individual shares the lessons learned from experience with group members.
- At the organizational level, the transfer of learning from experience occurs when learning is codified and used to transform general practice. Although difficult to achieve, this is the most powerful benefit of experiential learning. As leaders transfer their learning across the organization, they create shortcuts for other leaders to learn the same skills.

As McCall suggests, a mindset shift needs to take place—a recasting of leadership development from a training paradigm to experience-based learning. For this to work, the transfer of learning is critical; developmental experiences by themselves are not sufficient to result in organizational impact. The capacity of managers to participate in the process of learning transfer is a precursor to the lessons of experience rippling through the organization. The ripple effect will create shared leadership expertise, increase leadership capacity, and improve organizational performance. By embedding individual responsibility within an organizational culture that supports learning transfer, both the individual and the organization can reap their due return on experience.

Valuing Experience

We resonate with McCall's call to recast leadership development from competency models to that of experience-based learning. Ultimately, we suggest stimulating leader development among diverse managerial populations requires that two critically important questions be answered. The first is the question of content: What more do we need to know from a cross-cultural perspective about differences in event types and lessons learned? The second is the question of organizational process: How can individual experiences be tapped to achieve the transfer of learning? Answering these questions will bring us closer to the Lewinian ideal of a good and practical theory.

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