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Dream, Diagnose, Dialogue & Deliver:
**Lessons learned from a ‘4D’ leadership development intervention
in a high-performing pharmaceutical company**

Globally, many organisations face leader shortages, and developing a new generation of leaders remains a challenge to most. One way of addressing this issue is to delivering learner-specific, business-aligned, experiential interventions that are contextual, transfer-focused and line-manager supported. However, given the plethora of leader development methods, *which methods work for whom* is not very clear. We report an innovative leader development programme that aimed to infuse into leadership learners, energies for *dreaming, diagnosis, dialogue and delivery (4D)*. We present our theory-based, leader development programme (LDP) that combined four distinct development methods delivered in a high-performing, British pharmaceutical company. By sequencing the administration of visioning exercises, psychometric tests, coaching sessions and action research projects, this purpose-built LDP was seen to yield surprising results at personal and organisational levels, developing both leaders and leadership. We explore its effectiveness and advocate a *precision-oriented, method-sequenced, industry-university partnerships-based, 4D approach* to work-based leadership learning programmes.

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Leadership and Leadership Development Track

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Introduction

A global survey of more than 1000 C-level executives worldwide found out that 64% of the respondents identify that developing next generation of leaders and failure to attract and retain talent as the top two challenges that vie for leaders' attention in recent times (Dettmann et al, 2018). It is not surprising then, even in this unprecedented time of change, uncertainty and economic volatility, business organisations tend to invest heavily in developing leaders and leadership. According to an estimate (Nahavandi, 2015), the U.S. companies alone spend approximately £125 billion in employee learning and development, and around 40% of that investment goes to leadership development. However, there appears to be a growing dissatisfaction among business leaders about the impact of these programmes. The American Management Association's (2018) global survey of 1,398 HR professionals, spanning 96 countries and 37-plus industries, conclude that *only a third of the respondents* describe their leadership development efforts as effective. The effectiveness of LDPs tend to be a prominent concern in organisations of all types, and how to make them effective continues to be elusive. To address this gap, we present a tangible example of how leaders and leadership are developed in a high performing pharmaceutical company in the UK, using an innovative '4D' approach that sequences methods in a particular way for maximum impact.

Theoretical background

Leadership development, broadly defined to include the development of leaders and leadership, is an active and complex field of theory building and research (Day et al. 2014). It continues to evolve "at an unforeseen pace" (Ardichvili et al., 2016, p. 275), alongside the exponential growth of leadership books, empirical studies and theories. Despite this, it has been argued that the leadership development is a field "that it is in need of better research, documentation, and understanding, illustrated with real-life, tangible examples of what to do and just as importantly what not to do" (Bérard, 2013, p. 2). As scholars are interested in understanding the processes of leader development and ways of making them effective, a wide range of models (Komives and Wagner, 2016; Sosik and Jung, 2018; Clarke, 2013), approaches (Shamir and Eilam-Shamir, 2018; Murphy and Johnson, 2011; Sternberg, 2008) and methods or techniques (Sutherland, 2013; Schyns et a. 2012; Ardichvili and Manderscheid, 2008) have also been proposed. In fact, recently Turner et al (2018) mapped five hundred different leader development methods and mapped them against leadership capabilities that organisations may wish to develop in learners. More such useful efforts are still needed to help leadership scholars, programme designers and facilitators.

Although the plethora of leadership development methods and the flexibility they offer in developing leaders and leadership is promising, our knowledge about the effectiveness of these methods remain underdeveloped. This is because, evaluation of leadership development is inherently complex because of variations in programme design, delivery, and learner characteristics, the contexts in which learners learn and apply their learning, the transfer support, the time lags between what is learned, when and how it is applied and the measurement difficulties in capturing and demonstrating impact (Burke and Hutchins, 2007; Blume et al. 2010; Jarvis et. Al. 2013). Despite having various evaluation models and approaches (Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman, 2010; Edwards and Turnbull, 2013) we still need to understand how organisations understand the impact of their LDPs that enables them justify their investments. Day et al (2014) lament in their review of leadership development literature that evaluation "is often ignored in practice" (p. 78), despite the repeated calls for integrating it in all LDP designs. In what follows, we present the organisational context of the biopharma company ABC Ltd (pseudo name) and illustrate the programme we designed, delivered and evaluated.

Methodology

In this section, we outline how consultant-academics worked with the company's HR Director in designing, delivering and evaluating a LDP, termed here as '4D approach to leader development.'

The University's approach to Leadership Development

The consultant-academics work in a British University, whose approach to leadership development is underpinned by a commitment to developing system-wide leadership in organisations. It provides customised leadership development solutions that contribute to personal effectiveness (at the individual level) and increased team effectiveness (at the department level), and to sustained organisational effectiveness (at the collective level). Relying on objective and precise information generated by the administration of psychometric tools to individuals and groups, its LDPs approaches incorporate the multi-level approach of the overall strategy, and aim to develop emotional, moral and social intelligence in individuals, teams and organisations (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). In essence, its overarching capability development strategy is aligned with 'appreciative-coaching methods' in its orientation (Orem, Binkert, and Clancy, 2007; Wasserman, 2005), 'theory-based' in its programme design (Antonakis and House, 2013; Sosik and Jung, 2018), 'psychometrics-based' in its measurement of leadership capabilities (Passmore, 2012) and 'evidence-based' in its implementation.

Designing LDP in partnership with a Business Leader

When the University was commissioned to lead the LDP design, delivery and evaluation, the consultants had a series of conversations with the HR director of the company to understand its priorities. We learnt that the company's mission (*To protect patients' health through the quality-assured development and manufacture of biopharmaceuticals whilst maximising revenues through worldwide sales*) identifies clear customer and business outcomes. Its 'people objective' (*Developing a learning organisation which is capable, trained, motivated and rewarded to achieve excellence*) has a sharper focus on people's leadership and managerial capability development. The HR director made it clear that the company was facing a challenge to achieve "One ABC Ltd" – i.e. leaders ensuring that they optimise for the whole company with strategic thinking and doing, rather than optimising for their areas of responsibility and sub optimising at the organisational level. The Senior Management Team (SMT) had a strategically important, specific direction to achieve the people objective (*Develop and restructure current functional-based organisation structure to increase efficiency by enhancing a team-based, matrix management approach. Staff will be multi-skilled and flexible, having the ability to take on a variety of roles within ABC*). Overall, similar to what Feaser, Nielsen and Rennie (2017) found in their work, the consultants found at least four sets of priorities that matter to make the LDP effective for the client: (1) contextualising the programme based on the organisation's position and strategy, (2) ensuring sufficient reach across the organisation to develop leaders at all levels, (3) designing the programme for the transfer of learning, and (4) using system reinforcement to lock in change. Overall, there was a need to translate the company's strategy into a leadership model specific to their needs and the intervention needed to focus on leadership behaviours that SMT believed were critical drivers of business performance.

Theoretically, the ABC Ltd's approach appeared to be in alignment with the 'full range leadership development (FRLD) model' proposed by Bernard Bass, Bruce Avolio among others, although it was not pronounced very clearly. According to FLRD model, leadership

across the range is represented by five specific sets of behaviours. Here, a behavior is something a person does or says that can be observed, described and recorded (Sosik and Jung, 2018). These five behaviours describe five different forms of leadership. The five behaviours are:

1. Laissez-Faire (who avoids involvement, shows non-leadership)
2. Passive Management-by-exception ('fire-fighters' who follow a policy of 'if it is not broken, do not fix it')
3. Active Management-by exception ('spy looking for problems' who actively micro manages processes, identifies deviations and takes corrective action, before or soon after a problem arises – believes in close monitoring work performance for errors and predict possible errors and take proactive action to prevent mistakes)
4. Contingent Reward (those who agree goals, clarify roles, explain expectations, help follower meet the expectations, and if met, rewards achievement).
5. Transformational leader (who trusts others, inspires them to exceed goals, to perform beyond expectations, who promotes positive and meaningful changes in individuals, teams, departments and in organisation as a whole through influence, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, coaching and encouragement so that followers become as leaders).

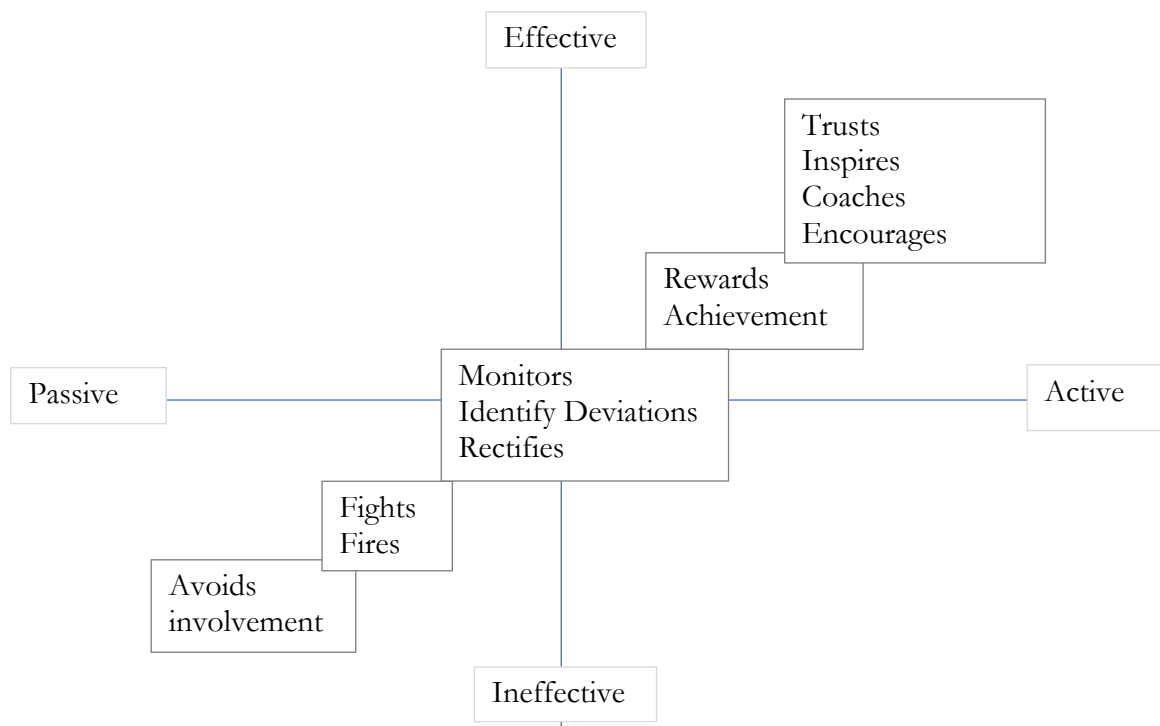


Figure 1: FRLD model – adapted from Sosik and Jung (2018). p. 31.

According to this model, as seen in Figure 1, leaders display a repertoire of both passive and active forms of leadership. The active forms of leadership are associated with higher levels of effectiveness and satisfaction than the more passive forms of leadership. We acknowledged that the preferred set of qualities (such as inspiring and coaching others) need to be amended to suit the ABC Ltd's context. The organisation specified what *experiences, competencies and relationships* are expected of them to deliver ambitious business goals, in its learning and development strategy. Since this model assisted us to enhance our understanding of what was expected of these leaders, we decided to use this model to design deliver and evaluate our programme.

To our surprise, we found limited published evidence of how leaders and leadership are developed in pharmaceutical companies. The small number of studies we found report some evidence of the relationship between organisational learning, transformational leadership and organisational performance (Garcia-Morales, Matias-Reche, and Hurtado-Torres, 2008), along with a few case illustrations on why leadership is required to make sense of strategizing and organising that happen in pharma companies (Colville and Murphy, 2006). Therefore, based on the LDP effectiveness literature (Edwards et al. 2013; Passmore, 2008; Page and De Hann, 2014; De Ciantis, 1995), we designed and proposed the following *sequence of methods* as a coherent programme of capability development. In designing, we were mindful of the observations made by Abelli and Werder (2018): “Most leadership training today is too long, too linear, and neither engaging nor contextualized for the learner. for that leadership development to be effective, how the content is delivered is just as important as the content itself. The solution needs to be efficient, effective, and engaging” (p.3). We also recognised that American Management Association’s global survey findings which reiterated that “*experience is a powerful teacher. Active, experiential learning transcends on-the-job training and builds global leaders* (Davis, 2018). Following the guidelines provided by Yost and Plunkett (2009) we linked the company’s business strategy with relevant *experiences, competencies and relationships*. In what follows, we illustrate the programme. The key objectives of LDP are to strengthen existing leadership capability across the system, and improve business performance by reinforcing company’s values and by increasing knowledge and understanding of the organisational changes.

Programme Design and Delivery

The HR director purposively sampled four high performers, representing various managerial levels from across the company, using a specific “nomination” process. The process is underpinned by the ambition to identify a pipeline of talent, developed and ready for key positions, and to develop ownership for personal development in learners. The identified learners participated in a four-step intervention that lasted for three months:

Step 1: Dream

To understand learners’ worldview, their perception of the company’s current challenges and strengths, their interpretation of organisational values and their *relationships* with the company, we introduced a ‘Values and Visuals’ worksheet exercise. In essence, prior to a face-to-face coaching session (in Step 3) learners have been asked to complete a two-part activity. In the first part, they were asked to reflect on the company’s values and write down their answers to the following questions in a worksheet. “*If you live by this value at work, how will it look like?*” “*If everyone in ABC lives by this value at work, how ABC will look like?*” In the second part, as suggested by Schyns et al. (2012) an activity, labelled as ‘Draw your big idea’ was given to all the learners and they were asked to visualise and draw how their company might look like if ‘flexible’ and ‘cross-functional working were to be achieved.

Step 2: Diagnose

On completing the first step, they were administered various psychometric tests, differentially based on their role. Since there is evidence to suggest that competencies develop, grow and emerge over time, and reveal themselves in different circumstances, in different ways (Hollenbeck, McCall Jr and Silzer, 2006; Zaccaro, 2007), we wanted to know how they perceive themselves, and how their direct reports perceive the learners, on the competencies that matter to achieving the business strategy. The following tests were used, because of their high reliability and validity in measuring the emotional, moral and social *competencies* we identified during the planning stage.

1. The Business-focused Inventory of Personality (BIP – Self-rated & – Observer) Tests
2. Management and Leadership Development Questionnaire (MLD-Q).

The tests were completed online, during work, and specific time was given to the learners, demonstrating the strategic importance of this measurement. The results were interpreted by the consultants and were kept ready to be shared with the learners, in the next step. The test results have also helped to address current business issues and improving the performance of individuals and teams.

Step 3: Dialogue

The learners were invited to attend a one-to-one executive coaching session held at the University Campus, facilitated by the academics certified in person-centred coaching. During the session, learners were given the opportunity to explain, describe and interpret their Values and Visuals exercise (completed in Step 1). To explain their ideas further, the consultants asked them during the coaching sessions, to draw how ABC appears to them today. By comparing and contrasting their ‘Ideal vision of the One ABC’ with the ‘perceived current status of the company’, they were able to bring out what needs to happen if ABC were to achieve its mission. The reflective sharing provided an opportunity for the consultant to explore, expand and if necessary, reject hypotheses arising from the psychometric results. The coach supported the learners by uncovering the multiple layers to get to the nub of things. The session helped them to order existing self-knowledge and understand the implications of what has been learnt (through the tests) in a manner which facilitated further reflection and action. Specifically, the coach gave them the necessary tools, and identified what types of *experiences* the leaders were expected to have, what *competencies* they had to develop, and what *relationships* they had to nurture, during their career (Yost and Plunkett, 2009), so that they can become effective, in their roles. On receiving a customised report, learners completed a personal development plan, and confidential development-oriented reports were sent to the HR director to inform system-wide learning plans.

Step 4: Deliver (a 90-day challenge)

The learners were sent back to have a session with the HR director, with their learning and career plans and the psychometric results. By then, the director had already identified *Action Learning* Projects the learners need to deliver, in transferring the learning at work. These projects were *critical, developmental experiences* that had “the potential to linking individual learning with systemic learning and change” (Marsick and O’Neill, 1999, p. 174). The director had worked with the learners’ line managers and collaboratively defined the parameters of these projects. These experiences are related to ‘wicked problems’ that were based on real work; they were complex, cross-functional, intended to meaningfully ‘stretch’ the learners. All projects included some form of external orientation, because Garratt (2011) argues problems that require ‘external exchanges’ tend “to be highly effective in personal development” (p. 32).

As part of the evaluation of our programme, at the end of the 90-day challenge, participants have been asked to reflect on their learning, capture and present their developmental outcomes to key stakeholders internally, and to the consultants at the university. During the presentations, learners shared their experiences of how and when they felt stretched, how did they live their values during the moments of stretch, what types of solutions they were able to generate towards creating the One ABC Ltd, how did they influence their team members, how, and if, they built their learning capacity as a result of engaging in action-learning, and how they engaged in developing their leader identity. The learner presentations demonstrated to us how the learners developed the required behaviours in work, and how they created ‘real

connections' that helped them become leaders, in the given context. With humility, they revealed something about themselves to others, with authenticity and sincerity, and 'personalise' their relationships (Owens and Hekman, 2012; Schein and Schein, 2018). Participants have learnt a range of creative and innovative techniques for solving problems and had an opportunity to apply learning, and demonstrate learning gains, with business confidence. They tended to view the privilege of leadership as an opportunity to develop others and to embed continuous learning in everyone, for organisational success.

With a strong emphasis on prompting reflection and assessment of the personal learning journey undertaken, these sessions challenged their thinking. These sessions were particularly useful in tackling "group think", shifting paradigms and positioning progress against external standards. Learners reported that these sessions boosted their self-confidence and helped them to look at a wider range of issues in greater depth. There is enough evidence that these learners have begun to use coaching techniques such as powerful questioning, decision making and enabling, to bring about a real cultural change. We saw that the reporting sessions prepared them to challenge the status quo within the organisation, with a very clear message from the HR Director that this was expected of them. The academics reassured that the learners were right to challenge the status quo on the issues they had raised. As a result, these sessions prepared the learners for the next stage in the process, a significant one, that is, presenting their thoughts and ideas before the executive members. This will not only have an impact at the individual participant level, but at the organisational level too, as it drives an open and challenging dialogue between Executive leadership and leaders below them in the organisation. These presentations also gave the HR Director another perspective on the participants' leadership potential, both through observation of the sessions, but also through feedback from the academics.

What lessons have we learnt?

1. Developmental methods, when including a visioning exercise, administration of a reliable diagnostic tool, a meaningful dialogue and a 'real-time' change-oriented activity, sequenced in a particular order as described here, are effective in developing certain type of managers as leaders, in a dynamic organisation.
2. The sequencing of developmental methods is dependent on the company's vision, mission, business objectives and L&D strategy. As there was a constant requirement to respond to a variety of different business and individual needs, sequencing the methods, within a 3-month period was challenging, but it worked.
3. The psychometric tests, when selected and administered appropriately and when combined with a discussion, provide a useful way of examining current ways of 'being' a leader, and new ways of 'becoming' a leader.
4. Articulating clearly what is expected of a leader, in a more concrete form, helped us creating a meaningful LDP. Defining what types of **experiences** the leaders are expected to have, what **competencies** they have to develop, and what **relationships** they have to develop during their career, in a particular role (Yost and Plunkett, 2009) is important for developing leaders and leadership in specific contexts.
5. The Industry-University partnership, created for the purpose of developing leaders and leadership in a pharmaceutical context is value-adding to all partners involved (i.e. to the company, university, learners, their line managers, academics and indirectly to the organisational customers and the students taught by the academics).

Emerging conclusions

Despite the ever-increasing investment in LDPs, Cohen (2019) observes that “there is little evidence that we are actually getting better leaders, or that leaders are more effective” (p.8). We report that the “4D” approach to LDP described here has helped the ABC Ltd company develop their human capital as part of their business strategy, and its managers have become better and more effective as leaders. Involving managers at various functional levels in this development programme has transformed how leadership development is seen across the organisation. Staff, who report to these learners, have begun to recognise the need for continual, self-directed learning and insightful questioning, and this is critical if ABC Ltd is to keep up with the pace of change. This approach is seen to take into account the critical theoretical considerations such as return on expectations of LDP, ensuring diversity and cross-cultural differences, and retention of high-potential talent. As more businesses recognise the critical nature of coaching and leadership and management skills development as parts of strategy formulation, we expect to see more positive orientation towards the “4D” approach to LDP. The commitment to this type of leadership development can potentially provide a common platform for developing future leaders and a forum for assessing the talent pipeline. By creating new leadership conversations, this approach strengthens the link between performance, engagement and leadership development and therefore, we advocate a *precision-oriented, method-sequenced, industry-university partnerships-based, 4D approach* to work-based, leadership learning programmes.

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