



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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Leader Development: Determining The Path To Sustainable Success Stories

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Abstract

Leadership development theories are sparse and have seldom studied the sustainability of leader skill development given development can result in either positive or negative outcomes. We argue that studying transitioning experiences provide us insight into early career challenges that leaders face and thereby allow for assessing the effect of the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors of leader on leadership development. We examine whether and if so how developmental challenges can help create sustainable leader outcomes given conditional roles played by the factors. In doing so, we draw from theories of work experiences, to explain how underlying phenomena occur during leadership development, which in-turn can inform long term organizational strategies for leader development.

Keywords:

Leader development, developmental context, sustainable skill development

Introduction

The presence of a good leader is imperative for building effective leadership in groups and teams, and therefore it seems credible that leader development is a foundational requirement for leadership development (Day & Harrison, 2007). At present, organizations enable leadership development through six practices (Day, 2000) that include – 360-degree feedback, executive coaching, mentoring, networking, action learning, and job assignments that contain assessment, challenge, and support. Of these, on-the-job experiences are still posed as the most potent mode of developing leaders.

Challenging contexts are expected to present opportunities for skill development through on-the-job learning or “crucible experiences” (Bennis & Thomas, 2007) such that individuals in those challenging contexts experience faster short-term career advancement when compared with those in less challenging contexts (Chattopadhyay & Choudhury, 2017). In fact, research reports that highly developmental assignments lead to higher on-the-job learning in managers (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; McCauley Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). But, the importance of the leader development agenda seems to have reached a hiatus with more recent literature on leader development reporting that challenging assignments can indeed result in negative outcomes (Courtright, Colbert, & Choi, 2014) and that not all developmental assignments produce leaders (Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, & Oh, 2009).

This is despite the fact that extant literature has previously associated development to positive outcomes, with leader development being facilitated by individual differences that include motivation to learn (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni et al., 2009), motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), and individual, relational, and collective identity (Day & Harrison, 2007). Similarly, job designs that include feedback, autonomy, and opportunity to develop, are said to engage the leader in leadership development efforts (Gegenfurtner, Veermans, Festner, & Gruber, 2009). Few recent studies have tied leadership development to outcomes like end-state competencies (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni et al., 2009),

transformational and abusive leadership (Courtright et al. 2014), and perceived role knowledge (Dragoni, Park, Soltis, & Forte-Trammell, 2014).

Therefore, any individual who is put through challenging jobs will alone not succeed in developing as a leader; leaders who undergo challenging assignments are subjected to individual and job environmental factors that interfere with their developmental process. Our study steers away from debates outlined above (as a few other studies in the past have also done), and shows how leaders in challenging experiences/assignments develop and sometimes fail to develop due to the influences of their personal attributes/traits and sometimes due to those of the work environment. Using the work experiences literature (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) and the job-demand and control model (Karasek, 1979; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), our study serves to, one, identify unique nuances in the context of the leader development process, and two, provide evidence in the interplay of the contextual and individual factors so as to bring in a more holistic and balanced perspective of the interplay of the elements that could lead to a more sustainable set of outcomes for the individual leader and the organization thereby critically answering the question as to when developmental challenges can actually result in positive leader development, and if so, how does this process occur given previous literature shows that outcomes can be negative or positive.

While we have presented only part of the overall proposed study here, our complete study will investigate elements that affect the leader development process at a proximal level and attempt to provide a more wholistic view of creating and sustaining the leader development agenda. We have also outlined the method of study and our sample design so as to impress on the pertinence of the study in today's organizational context.

Theory and hypotheses

Transitioning experience and challenging assignments

In fast paced and competitive business environments, there is a tension that is apparent between getting things done versus developing individuals (McCall, 2010). It is also common that organizations that have a high employee to manager ratio tend to promote internal candidates to senior positions rather than hiring externally (Baron et al., 1986). But, while promoting internal candidates, they are likely to choose those individuals who have a track record of faster career advancement inside the organization (Chattopadhyay & Choudhury, 2017). However, faster career advancement does not necessarily provide the requisite learnings for taking on first-line managerial roles that typically require leaders to take on task characteristics (McCauley et al., 1994) that they are otherwise not exposed to.

But then, job assignments are the oldest and most effective forms of leader development, and they are developmental when they stretch people, displace people from their comfort zone, and compel people to think and act differently (Ohlott, 2004). It is also seen that early career deployments in challenging situations is expected to have positive effects on speed of career advancement through the development of human capital (Chattopadhyay & Choudhury, 2017). Therefore, given the knowledge on experience-based leadership development, it should rightfully follow that experiences can be provided to individuals based on the assessment of skill gaps and potential of the individual at the various stages of career however, seldom does this logic hold, as the pressure to choose proven candidates for challenging assignments over those who can learn is high and the maniacal focus of organizations to achieve results pushes developmental experiences to the backseat (McCall, 2010).

However, McCall (2010) also argues that when organizations are obsessed with short-term success, long-term developmental focus loses consideration, as development takes time, is risky given the possibility of failure, and costs resources. It is therefore that we examine the transitioning experience of first-line managers as this provides us a premise to test both positive and deleterious effect of factors on early career individuals in challenging situations where the expected effect on skill learning and career advancement are recognized to be the most pronounced. Thus, we preliminarily hypothesize that the effect of developmental challenges on leader skill development for transitioning leaders will follow a positive incremental path.

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between developmental challenges and leadership skill development will be positive for transitioning managers.

Leadership Self and Means Efficacy as a critical mechanism of translation of developmental challenges to leader skill development

To be effective and successful in a business environment plagued with change and complexities, today's leaders are required to learn and develop multiple skills and abilities (Dragoni et al., 2009) however, some individuals are better at building such skills than others (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Day and Dragoni (2015) in their review of the leadership development literature explain why self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997) play a potentially important role in the leader development process. Self-efficacy has a more complex and multifaceted role in leader development than already been understood, but there are yet no established theories or models that can explain the process through which self-efficacy beliefs influence development. For example, the work experience literature (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) indicates that the individual difference factor like self-efficacy interacts with qualitative job components in order to enhance knowledge and skills.

Leader efficacy examines the hierarchical structure of a leader's efficacy beliefs which comprises of general self-efficacy, means efficacy (Eden, 2001), and various domains of specific self-efficacy, and the interactions between these various forms for enabling effective performance while, leadership efficacy pertains to a multi-level approach to understanding how individual (follower and leader), team/collective, and organizational levels of efficacy emerge in organizations (Hannah et al., 2008). Though higher leader self-efficacy is associated with the promotion of leader development, Machida and Schaubroeck (2011) suggest that preparatory self-efficacy, efficacy spirals, learning self-efficacy, and resilient self-efficacy interact in causing leader development. Similarly, Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas (1995) proposed the self-efficacy spirals where an increase or decrease in self-efficacy caused a similar change of an increase or decrease in performance, ultimately leading to self-correcting cycles that resulted in constant trends of increase or decrease in performance. The efficacy spirals play an important role in leader development (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011) as an individual possessing lower self-efficacy during the preparatory, learning, or development phases is in an advantageous position given, higher self-efficacy can lead individuals to become complacent thereby inhibiting them from taking an active role in further development. Therefore, during developmental challenges that inherently have difficult tasks that result in failure, leader's self-efficacy must fluctuate so as to enable the self-correcting cycles to baseline the self-efficacy levels to moderate ranges as, both upward and downward self-efficacy spirals inhibit the learning of leadership skills and the leader's development per se (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011).

Challenging experiences induce doubts on abilities and skills and lower self-efficacy of the leader but, learning processes induce self-correcting cycles that arrest the downward spirals and amplify upward spirals such that these experiences foster leader development (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Efficacy spirals consequently reconstitute our understanding of the level of leadership self and means efficacy (Hannah, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2012) (LSME) that causes higher development and we hence hypothesized that the process of skill development via LSME results in better outcomes when we baseline to a moderate level of LSME rather than to higher levels.

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationship between developmental challenges and leadership skill development will be mediated by the transitioning leaders' LSME such that moderate baseline level LSME will mediate stronger outcomes than higher or lower levels.

Work contexts

Difficult managerial situations lead to intense unplanned experiences that call for high engagement from managers (Chattopadhyay & Choudhury, 2017) and such experiences are transformative in nature leading to the building of superior leadership skills, given managers exert themselves in exceptional ways (Bennis & Thomas, 2007). Transitioning leaders who are first-time managers are most likely to face surmounting issues not just in respect to invoking individual level transformations in behavior as a leader but also in respect to contextual elements of the challenging situations that they are subjected to. According to the work experiences theory (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), contextual features of the work environment at different levels of analysis have a direct effect on qualitative aspects of work experiences. The work experiences theory also poses that at the immediate work level context, job characteristics interact with qualitative components of the job for skill development and motivation. Similarly, the JDCA (Karasek, 1979) and JDR (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) models that draw from the job characteristics model (JCM) (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) consider job autonomy as a job resource that has positive effects on job motivation, engagement, and performance (Ng & Feldman, 2015). In the same manner, jobs that are mentally challenging and requiring usage of complex skills are considered to be complex jobs, which interact with autonomy in predicting work outcomes (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

Job autonomy.

Job autonomy, also referred to as decision latitude or job control in the job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979) is conceptualized as the degree to which individuals can freely carry out work tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kubicek, Paškvan and Bunner, 2017). We examine job autonomy (JA) from job resources (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010) perspective as the JCM assumes it to be an inherent characteristic of work. JA has been associated exclusively with positive effects on employee motivation, well-being, job satisfaction, and performance. Increased autonomy is said to allow individuals greater discretion to decide on how to perform work and therefore provide them greater flexibility in defining their roles (Fried, Hollenbeck, Slowik, Tieg, & Ben-David, 1999; Troyer, Mueller, & Osinsky, 2000) and is also said to allow individuals the ability to go through trials and errors thereby going through developmental opportunities that facilitate their growth and development (Sumpter, Gibson, & Porath, 2017).

While there are these positive accounts on the effect of JA on employee job outcomes, some research has indicated that JA may be detrimental to employee outcomes in situations of job complexity (Warr, 2013). This has been further clarified by Kubicek, Paškvan and Bunner (2017), who propose that individual and job characteristics influence the positive or deleterious effect of JA. We, therefore, argue that JA may not always result in a positive effect and that higher or lower JA may be deleterious whereas moderate levels of JA will result in superior leader outcomes. We hence hypothesized that job autonomy moderates the relationship between developmental challenges and LSME and this effect goes through fluctuations at differing levels of job autonomy.

Hypothesis 3: Job autonomy will moderate the positive relationship between developmental challenges and LSME.

Method

Participants

Participants to the current research are a purposive sample of first-time managers working full-time in the information technology and allied industries. The study proposes to sample about 150 managers. The study will also include responses from their respective supervisors. Supervisors may have one or more managers reporting to them at the time of the study but will independently respond to questions on each manager.

Procedure and analytical strategy

Participants answer a paper-and-pen type survey questionnaire using established measures for the variables. Manager and supervisor surveys (different instruments) will be administered separately and at different times. Control and demographic variables are also collected from the individual managers and supervisor as required. The research will use structured equation modelling to validate the research model and to test the various hypotheses including mediation and moderation effects. The researchers propose to use PLS-SEM or M-Plus software for testing the data and model.

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