

## **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS: AN INTEGRATED REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

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### **Abstract:**

Though organizations worldwide utilize leadership development programs (LDPs), discussions about the topic have been sporadic. LDPs have only recently been analyzed by researchers and questions remain about why they should be offered; who should participate; what should take place; and when it should occur. While organizations across the globe preach about the importance of employing strong leaders, few can successfully measure and demonstrate the effectiveness of their own leadership development programs. As such, management teams find themselves in a tough position when it comes to spending training dollars in general and for LDPs in particular. In a troubled economy with margins tighter than ever before, Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals are being asked to demonstrate how investing in LDPs strengthen the organization. Not surprisingly, the answers remain vague and uninspiring. This paper reviews the literature on LDPs, discusses major issues inhibiting the effectiveness of LDPs, and explores responses to the questions raised here.

**Keywords:** leadership development, training, learning, effectiveness, RODI, coaching

### **Introduction**

This paper is a review of the literature regarding leadership development programs (LDPs), including their purpose and effectiveness. Although leadership is an emerging interdisciplinary field, there has been very little research on LPDs in general (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010). Over the last century, only 201 articles were published related to leadership interventions and considerably less focused on whether training was worthwhile (2010). LDPs have become common in the last two decades to address the pressing need to prepare adequate numbers of leaders as well as help develop and improve leadership skills and abilities; though there has been very little focus on evaluating these programs (Ely et al., 2010).

The need for leaders and leadership has been frequently discussed in the contemporary management circles with minimal advancement (Stafferstone, 2005). Few would argue poor leaders are beneficial for organizations, but what is the impact of a strong leader or effective LDPs for the organization? Traditionally, the term *leadership* suggests direct control over others (Kouzes & Posner, 1989). However, the rapid change and advancements in economic, political, technological, and social factors influence the need for more-effective leaders in the workplace that do not attempt to control others but rather lead others (Amagoh, 2009). The articles reviewed for this literature review demonstrated the need for a more-comprehensive understanding of LDPs, from what they are to why organizations are investing in leadership.

Companies and organizations place immense capital and trust in leaders yet lack an in-depth understanding of LDPs. Though the capital invested is significant and on the surface appears influential, the openness to when and how these programs are led should make even the biggest supporters of leadership development question their value. Many organizations promote based on seniority and experience in the organization (Phelen & Lin, 2001) rather

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than taking consideration for who possesses the qualities most typically associated with effective leaders. This may lead to negligence of how LDPs can help leaders become effective that may further impact employee satisfaction, job productivity, and organizational performance. Until we gain a better understanding of leadership practice in general, and effective development, implementation, and evaluation of LDPs the organization will likely continue to suffer from lower employee morale, higher turnover rates, and additional cost of ineffective organizational interventions.

## **1. Method**

The purpose of LDPs is to ensure the development of the most appropriate style of leadership for universal levels of practice (Bolden, 2005). However, without effective evaluation methods or comprehensive and uniform understanding of LDPs, the organization engaged in these training efforts will continue to invest in the unknown. This integrated literature review asks (a) *what do we know about LDPs?* (b) *how should we assess effectiveness?* and, (c) *what is still missing?* Existing literature contains partial responses to these questions; however, a systematic review has been utilized to fill present gaps. This literature review of LDPs began with a composite journal search using the following databases: Wiley Online Journal, DOAJ, SAGE Journals, SAGE Publications, ERIC, Emerald Management eJournals, and Taylor & Francis Online. An initial search of “leadership development” offered too broad a range of relative themes. Instead, results from examinations of “leadership development programs”, “leadership development training”, “leadership development evaluation”, and “leadership development effectiveness” were chosen and abstracts browsed for appropriateness. By adding the terms “training”, “evaluation”, and “effectiveness” in each search, articles aligned more-appropriately with the desired content. Each search returned between 40,000 and 80,000 published pieces. The authors selected and examined approximately 50 of the most closely-aligned articles, though fewer were ultimately incorporated. Articles published since 1997 were given priority as a great deal of research has taken place since. However, additional articles and authors referenced were screened. Peer-reviewed journal articles were primarily used, though books cited in articles further contributed to development of the paper.

## **2. Defining Leadership Development**

Prior to reviewing aspects of LDPs, readers should possess a uniform understanding of the terms. Unfortunately, a universal definition of leadership development does not exist. A comprehensive theory about leadership has also yet to be developed (Avolio et al., 2010; Akdere, 2007). Articles published in just the last two decades offer numerous descriptions of what leadership development is and should be in general. As Northouse (2010) argues, it seems there are almost as many definitions as there are those writing about LD. In an online search of the ERIC database, “what is leadership development in organizations” returned more than 66,000 articles alone. Articles most relevant highlighted the diversity of LDPs with studies on generational leaders, school leadership, managerial work, and long-term organizational change. The Leadership Network (n.d.), a consulting agency specializing in LDPs, defines leadership development as an intentional effort to provide leaders with opportunities to learn, grow, and change and appears to be as appropriate a definition as any. Allen, Conklin, and Hart (2008) define LD as a process of expanding an organization’s capacity to generate leadership to attain organization goals (). In sum, it seems LDPs emphasize the concerted, formalized effort of individuals and organizations towards leader improvement.

The concept of development is even more abstract than leadership itself. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines *development*, as the art of or result of developing or the state of being developed; and, as such, suggests there is potential for enhanced refinement. The current definition lacks clarity in whom or what is being developed and how development is happening. Even a brief glance at the definition challenges programmers with the amount of time required to develop someone or something and leaves an open window for approaching leadership development. Though the number of recent articles published to support the need for analysis of LDPs, progress appears quite stagnant.

### **3. Important Contributions**

Articles on LDP highlight several traits and components important to developing leaders. Training efforts should be realistic, practical, and provide opportunity for growth (Solansky, 2010) as well as include feedback and exercises which will lead to increased effectiveness of how one would lead (Avolio et al., 2010). They should also include development of skills related to effective communication, analytical thinking, and efficient organization as well as the ability to challenge and confront others, be results-oriented, have an emphasis on integrity, ability to empathy and care, flexibility, and trust development (Ely et al., 2010). The biggest challenge might be inclusion of most of the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs) into a very short and brief training to achieve leadership development.

#### **3.1. Where?**

Though the definition of development is vague, authors of LDP-related articles appear to agree that leadership development can occur in nearly any environment. Typical successful interventions have included classroom training, assessment centers, experiential coursework, retreats, and self-help books (Ely et al., 2010). It seems beneficial that LDP planners evaluate and consider the learning environment, the objectives of the program, and the learners when selecting the place for training to take place. Leaders working in the service industry may be less comfortable in a highly-formal environment than corporate leaders participating in training. Even if training has not been planned, opportunities for training constantly arise. These moments, while not a substitute for formal training, can produce results (Kaye, 1993), leading to the need to clarify the purpose of LDPs.

#### **3.2. Purpose**

Consensus appears to exist regarding the overall purpose of LDPs. For organizations, Amagoh (2009) suggests these programs should focus on knowledge and skills that will enhance leader effectiveness. Research has shown a direct correlation between individual intelligence and overall leader effectiveness (Atwater, et al., 1999). The skills gained in LDPs provide not only additional knowledge regarding content but also influence the way they are perceived by others. Further, LDPs should provide purpose, direction, and motivation to help leaders bring people to act together to accomplish a common goal (Antal, 2013). For these programs to be successful, participants need to understand why they are participating and identify how the training will impact their leadership effectiveness.

Leadership development is on-going without a culminating outcome. It is a process for individuals to participate in and grow (Northouse, 2010; Amagoh, 2009; Ely et al., 2010). As with most discussions related to adult education, the concepts, beliefs, and understanding of LD is always being refined. No matter the training, adults are exposed to theories which contradict their current beliefs and ultimately may force change of best-suited approaches. Leadership is not a one-way event but rather an interactive process involving the learner in a

given context (Northouse, 2010). Each interaction can lead to growth and change for the prospective or seasoned leader. By arguing leadership development is a long-term process, identification of the best candidate for a leadership position appears to become rather insignificant. Instead, the selection of candidates for leadership positions was deemed critical (Avolio et al., 2010) and is closely associated with organizational performance outcomes.

The effectiveness of leaders has been repeatedly analyzed and authors have identified numerous recurring traits. Individual predictors for leadership effectiveness include self-esteem, physical fitness, cognitive ability, and prior influence experiences (Atwater et al., 1999). Additionally, high motivation to lead is a critical need in being an effective leader (Avolio et al., 2010). The impact of learners possessing these traits during training is and has been under review. As Fegley reported, the number one problem for human resource professionals is identifying leadership talent that will lead to growth and expansion of respective organizations (as cited in Avolio et al., 2010). It is critical for program providers to understand that simply identifying and placing individuals in leadership development programming does not ensure they will become effective leaders once the training is complete. Numerous contributors to leader effectiveness have been identified but no single trait or quality has emerged which guarantees a strong leader. Leadership is a concept and a phenomenon for the organizations. Antal (2013) adds that leadership is the art of influence. Northouse (2010) defines leadership as a process where an individual provides influence on an entire group working towards a shared goal. Three traits of leadership include a process, influence, and group settings that involve accomplishing common goals (2010). Leadership is regarded as critical to any organizational process and programs, and can solely be contributed to a program's overall effectiveness. Leadership training, leadership coaching, executive coaching, advanced coaching practices, and leadership mentoring have all been associated with LDPs. However, leadership coaching has been argued as distinguishable and separate from general LDPs.

### **3.2.1. Types of LDPs.**

Numerous types of training programs have been tailored specifically for leadership development. Leadership coaching has become an integral component of most leadership development strategies (Boyce, Jackson, & Neal, 2010) and is a component of leadership development but distinguishable as it specifically focuses on the learner (Ely et al., 2010). Leadership development coaching recognizes the impact managers have when interacting with employees. Unfortunately, the difficulty with coaching is that managers need to recognize opportunities and verbalize them (Kaye, 1993). Coaching takes time and must be understood and accepted by managers (Kaye, 1993) as it focuses on the one-on-one relationship between the coach and the client (Ely et al., 2010). Boyce, Jackson, and Neal (2010) suggest that the quality of relationship between the trainer and the trainee is the single most important factor for successful outcomes. Northouse (2010) adds that leaders and followers are involved together in the leadership process making it a two dimensional relationship. Coaching takes place at work where a manager or leader mentors the less-skilled protégé (Amagoh, 2009). The end goal is that the guidance provided should meet the needs of the individual as well as those of the organization (Ely et al., 2010).

Self-development leadership programs are another variant of LDPs. Self-development leadership training focuses on learning experiences in which the leader takes primary responsibility for their growth in leadership capacities (Boyce, Zaccaro, & Wisecarver, 2010). The leader essentially decides what knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to improve upon and follow by choosing the most appropriate method (Orvis & Ratwani, 2010). Boyce,

Zaccaro, and Wisecarver (2010) note how organizations are seeking creative ways to continue this type of training effectively because of changing dynamics in the workplace as well as time required for LDPs. Those most successful with this approach usually have high levels of self-monitoring and awareness (Avolio et al., 2010; Foti & Hauenstein, 2007). Self-monitoring individuals are sensitive to situational cues (Foti & Hauenstein, 2007). As financial constraints in the workplace may begin to limit formal training opportunities, self-development LDPs could receive additional attention.

Learning through personal experience is a common element of many LDPs. Atwater, Dionne, Avolio, Camobreco, and Lav (1999) note how learners use life experiences to demonstrate influence on one another. The experiences of learners are discussed and analyzed to provide a learning opportunity for all involved. Leaders regularly struggle to receive desired responses from subordinates and sometimes fail at understanding why. In using past situations, learners participating in LDPs critique what contributed to their ineffective leadership moments. Learners are enabled to build from their experiences and apply to future contexts.

Organizations will also utilize learning from others' experiences when developing leaders. Antal (2013) describes how one army leadership training program uses powerful films as an education tool when developing soldiers into leaders. The films directly relate to situations where leaders made a decision and demonstrate how those choices left an impact. Afterwards, cadets conduct mock battles, mimicked by the past leadership moments presented in the films, and apply their learning into a real-life example. Antal (2013) found this type of learning to be influential and ultimately successful as leaders were able to see first-hand and ultimately learn from others' mistakes.

### **3.2.2. Outcomes**

Articles on LDP generally identify the evaluation process as a critical component of leadership development. Evaluation is essential for assessing both the outcomes of leadership development interventions and for overall training improvement (Ely et al., 2010). Avolio (2005) suggests evaluations are a nice component to have but few seem to understand the true value. The challenges for determining how to evaluate LDPs were highlighted in the literature; nonetheless, solutions were sparse. Scholars often grappled with the notion of adequately evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of these programs in a meaningful manner.

Hannum, Martineau, and Reinelt's (2007) work is regarded as the most comprehensive piece on evaluating LDPs. They address various pressing issues related to evaluating and assessment of LDPs in general and particularly their overall effectiveness. They make an argument for the purpose of evaluating LDPs, the need for setting clear goals and objectives, the importance of establishing effective evaluation strategies, and the results of designing assessment strategies for return on investment (ROI). Their contribution to the field of leadership is substantial and clearly articulates a foundation from which organizations can build upon. From the HRD literature, Collins and Holton's (2004) meta-analysis includes 103 leadership development studies on leadership effectiveness and makes recommendations for improvement of LDPs. The pieces take significant strides towards our understanding of LD program evaluations.

### **3.2.3. Return on Investment**

Understanding the costs versus the benefits of LDPs has been studied in various fields and settings. A leadership gap now exists between the need for leaders and resources available

(Kincaid & Gordick, 2003). To reduce the gap, organizations need to be able to effectively develop leaders in the organization through training and demonstrate the impact of these efforts (Avolio et al., 2010). Avolio et al. (2010) posit a war on leadership talent exists as a human resource director's biggest problem is identifying and developing talent. While organizations have invested in programs to develop leaders, measuring their impact has been not rather challenging. The amount of time and intensity of discussions on LDP do not align with the amount of resources invested in LDPs. Csoka (1997) found companies rating themselves as having high leadership capacity also reported having strong leadership programs, but little quantifiable or qualitative information was offered for support.

Avolio et al. (2010) contribute an insightful strategy for calculating return on leadership development investment (RODI) based on human behavior costs and subsequent returns. They account for the diminishing effects of a leadership intervention over time, which may or may not be entirely accurate, while also considering the amount of time involved, the location, trainer expenses, technology, and lost production time in the intervention (Avolio et al., 2010). While the numbers are estimates, they consider both low-and high-end impacts of cost versus benefit. Additionally, they consider various effect sizes of interventions based on leader performance and management levels. Most importantly, the takeaway appears to be there is a low risk of having a negative RODI for leadership interventions (Avolio et al., 2010).

### **3.3. The Literature Gap**

The list of qualities a leader should have is overwhelming to the point the traits may in fact be related to any strong employee. In identifying leaders, employers seek those who are high in motivation, self-monitoring, intelligent, extroverted, open to experience, hardened, possess high self-esteem, and have moral reasoning abilities (Foti & Hauenstein, 2007; Avolio et al., 2010; Atwater et al., 1999). These traits lead to the question of whether employers ever seek employees who are not motivated, cannot monitor themselves, would not be considered bright, are closed-minded, have low levels of self-esteem, and struggle to distinguish right from wrong. It seems plausible a more concise and well-articulated argument for what traits a successful leader actually needs to possess exists.

The literature appears to neglect how those participating in LDPs against their will may be leaving organizations with a smaller ROI as compared to those who relish the role. Northouse (2010) argues leadership involves influencing others, with everyone striving towards a common goal. Additionally, leadership involves attributes or characteristics, often similar to those who have previously been successful in comparable roles (Goldsmith, 2000). There is a significant likelihood that if someone is participating in LDPs against their wishes, that they will not fully-engage in the themes being discussed. This oversight appears significant; particularly for organizations typically promoting these programs based on tenure and position which calls for reconsideration of design and target population in LDPs.

Many terms associated with leadership development, including coaching, training, mentoring, executive coaching, and advanced coaching practices, have not been clearly distinguished either. Literature about each topic is abundant but they are difficult to differentiate because of significant overlap. Each term appears to be used interchangeably depending on the author as well as their respective disciplines. Perhaps, similar to distinguishing learning and education, these terms are comparable and are often nearly identical. However, a thorough review of each would further contribute to the discussion, and provide a greater understanding for the development, of LDPs.

### **3.3.1. Who Should Lead?**

The literature also neglects to discuss how LDPs impact those not identified as leaders. Arguments for selecting qualified or particular LDP candidates appears to contradict the notion that leadership development programming can be effective for anyone. If these programs require a certain type of learner or individual the programs would therefore be considered ineffective for learners not already identified as leaders. Perhaps instead there is no significant difference between the two types of trainees. Atwater et al. (1999) found no differences for those learners who were considered to have increased consciousness, and instead they were hardened to feedback or had higher levels of moral reasoning; all qualities suggested by some to influence effective leadership. This example suggests the type of leader does not necessarily impact the success of these programs.

Interestingly, little research is available regarding the most appropriate age group to participate in LDPs. Our understanding of leadership development is primarily limited to programming for older adults (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Young adults are taught very basic leadership skills to include effective communication and teamwork but focus on comprehensive leader development has no definitive timeframe. While intelligence appears to be correlated with leadership (Foti & Hauenstein, 2007), countless examples of adults with vast knowledge who also struggle to lead exist. The significant amount of senior managers who fail in their roles suggests age may be an irrelevant factor in leadership development. It can further be argued that if LDPs were introduced in classrooms for high school students, more-effective young leaders may already be in place by the time these young adults enter college or the workforce. Murphy and Johnson (2011) argue that development occurs more readily for adolescents because their behaviors and skills are more malleable than adults.

Komives' (2011) and Sternberg's (2011) studies demonstrate how research on LDPs for college students tends to focus on student leaders in group contexts with little focus on the training received. College students perhaps learn to lead differently or can offer insight into leadership development as a whole. A plausible reason for the lack of focus on student leaders is that few models exist related to leadership development for young adults (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Perhaps a model for leadership development for adolescents and traditional college students would elevate programming and provide emphasis on the development of leaders at a younger age.

Finally, are those in positions of responsibility more effective leaders because of LDP training or because of their title? Similar to age, prior training received does not guarantee successful leadership interventions. Beyond traits already mentioned, Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) found conscientiousness and being open to experience as the strongest indicators of a leader. Companies have long debated promoting based on seniority or performance (Phelen & Lin, 2001). However, examples of hard working employees now doing a poor job of leading others are widespread and as such work ethic does not guarantee effective leaders. If age, training, and title all can impact leader effectiveness, the combination of each needs to be considered by leadership program planners and organization leaders.

### **3.3.2. Consensus on Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of these programs is critically lacking evidence for anyone advocating for any LDPs. Studies by Collins and Holton (2004) and Hannum et al. (2007) delve deeply into the challenges of designing effective LDPs and emphasize evaluation of return on investment. These pieces only hide the fact that organizations blindly assume their LDPs lead to improved leadership practices without assessing the immediate and long-term impact on the

organization (Collins & Holton, 2004). Amagoh (2009) notes most organizations fail to assess the outcomes of programs while Avolio et al. (2010) states that estimates are at between 10 and 20 percent of organizations investing in LDPs actually follow through to evaluate the program's effectiveness. McDermott, Levenson, and Newton also found that only one third of leadership coaching interventions is evaluated. An overall assessment of LDP effectiveness is difficult to conduct because of the immense variability in tactics and possible outcomes (Collins & Holton, 2004). This does not mean that assessing effectiveness should be ignored. The amount of time, money, and energy invested in training suggests organizations view LDPs as relevant. The fact that a majority of LDPs remain unevaluated is cause for concern and requires further attention.

#### **4. The Future of Leadership Development Programs**

The literature supports the need for ways to efficiently and accurately evaluate the effectiveness of LDPs. Surprisingly the largest percentage of allocated funds from training and development departments often goes to leadership development (Ardichvili & Manderscheid, 2008). Complaints are prevalent system-wide when it comes to the evaluation process of LDPs (Ely et al., 2010). Evaluations are necessary to serve as supportive evidence of individual performance improvement and enhancement (Ely et al., 2010). The lack of clarity in the evaluation process inhibits the trainer and learner's ability to identify their overall success and make improvements or revisions to the program. In addition, the question needs to be addressed regarding who is prepared to lead LDPs in the organization. No formal accreditation, qualification or certificate of any kind is required to be a leadership development trainer (Ely et al., 2010). This lack of accountability on multiple levels likely is a contributing factor to our underdeveloped perspectives on LDPs. Similar to many other fields, standards for trainers for leadership development would be beneficial.

Further research needs to be conducted regarding the long term influence LDPs have on leaders and their followers. The behaviors and attitudes of followers are one way to demonstrate effectiveness (Amagoh, 2009) but how long those behaviors remain present have not been studied. Beyond core material, much of the learning in training programs is forgotten relatively quickly. Program objectives should focus on what is considered vital to long-term leader stability. While the themes in LDPs have been identified as important, it is also necessary to review the amount of time needed for effective training. When the concepts are forgotten, the specific traits learned and recalled offer an additional research opportunity. Perhaps developing more-effective teams is a concept most likely to be remembered over the long term while effective communication strategies subside over time. In recognizing extended transferability of concepts, program strategies may also be revised.

Finally, research must identify how LDPs contribute to the overall value of an organization. Beyond the known unknowns that exist, there are unknown unknowns (Avolio et al., 2010). The assumption is that LDPs yield a return greater than the cost (Avolio et al., 2010), but the variability in investment, training strategies, participant traits, trainers, and a host of other factors influence the impact of time and resources allocated. Amagoh's (2009) conceptual piece notes organizations with effective leaders tend to innovate, respond to changing environments, and sustain high performance. However, training provided might not be the cause of the changes as many leaders do not participate in training. The trait approach to leadership—leaders are born versus are made—has an extensive history. As the selection of candidates for LDPs is important, so too are the concepts taken out of the training and the way they are applied. If LDPs do not result in transfer of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed



for leadership practice, the programs may be irrelevant and actually impede the overall growth and success of a company.

## **Conclusion**

While research on leadership development has become an identified need amongst researchers and professionals, actual progress towards understanding why it is important appears limited. Qualities or skills leaders possess remain open to debate and effective evaluations of these training programs are at best. New research demonstrates correlations between LDPs and their effectiveness but is rather limited in scope. At a time when companies are highly-conscientious of expenditures, organizational leaders may be at crossroads regarding their LDPs. Further research is needed to address each of these leader development issues (Avolio et al., 2010). Until studies are conducted which demonstrate how LDPs contribute to increases in revenue, employee and customer satisfaction, and return on investment, the discussion about these programs will remain stagnant.

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