

## **The lived experience as leadership development**

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The Lived Experience as Leadership Development

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experience of leadership development within an individual organisation as seen from the perspective of four directors of a major organization. There is a dearth of research exploring the lived experience of leadership at the level of the individual, particularly focused at informal naturalistic development (Burgoyne & Hodgson, 1985). Further there has been a call for qualitative research into leadership development (Day, 2000; Lowe & Gardener, 2001) and it is towards such a methodology that this research seeks to contribute. Qualitative research in the form of in-depth purposive interviews have been undertaken with four directors of an Multi-national Public Limited Company who were asked to explore how they have learnt how to lead. Grounded theory (Parry, 1998) has been utilized to identify key themes drawn from transcribed interviews.

The preliminary findings elude to previous research in the extant literature where leadership development is significantly influenced by notable people and problematic experiences (McCall 1998; Lombardo et al 1988) and is an evolving phenomenon being continually shaped by enactive learning (Bandura, 1986) most predominantly the influence of people as role models – good and bad. However, themes have emerged that are distinct to the case organisation and reflect particular socialisation processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Sjostrand et al, 2001) that shape managers perceptions of effective leadership within this organisation. The similarity of leadership schema (Lord & Emrich, 2001) drawn from idiosyncratic experiences, suggest that understanding of leadership may be significantly shaped within an organization and such leadership learning may be both stimulated and constrained by situated learning (Lave & Wegner, 1991) and the interplay between structures and agency (Archer, 1995; 2000).

## INTRODUCTION

A striking paradox exists in the world of leadership development. Organisations perceive leadership as a key source of competitive advantage and have been, and will continue to invest in developing both the human and the social capital within their organisations (Conger, 1996; Moxley, 1998; Day, 2001) which is estimated to be in excess of \$60 billion (James, 2001).

However, during this period through the eighties and nineties, researchers (McCall, 1998; McCall et al, 1988; Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Marserrick, 1988; McCauley et al, 1989) identified that the predominant development arena was informal and accidental learning in action; the key development areas of which were seen to be stretching project assignments, notable people and hardships (McCall et al, 1988); yet formal development programmes continue to be the dominant focus for leadership development practice.

Considerable learning is tacitly accumulated (Polyani, 1966) through the milieu of experience shaped and identified through significant incidents and episodes (Cope and Watts, 2000) set within particular contexts and the notion of situated learning (Lave & Wegner 1991; Wegner, 1998; Fox 1997; Gherardi et al, 1998) is most relevant to appreciating how leaders may learn how to lead. The notion of situated engagement (Wegner, 1998) through relationships among persons and activities can be seen to provide pathways of experience. Such experiences occur through varying occupied roles within organizational contexts that provides access to learning opportunities (Lave & Wegner, 1991) molded by an interaction of structure and agency where managers, in organizational roles, are shaped and shape structural and cultural dynamics (Archer, 1995; 2000; Giddens 1985).

Equally there is another paradox that while so much research has been undertaken in understanding the phenomenon and characteristics of leadership, there has been a relative dearth of explicit research into leadership development (Day, 2001). Perhaps the paradox is in some way a consequence of the equivocal ontological perspective of leadership exemplified as “*How can we train leaders if we don’t know what leadership is?*” (Barker, 1997, p.343).

This paper seeks to focus attention towards the informal processes of leadership development within the notion of “lived experience” and explicitly within a single organization. Such a localised perspective of leadership development reflects recent research debate where there has been a call for greater in-depth empirical qualitative research (Parry, 1998; Bryman, 1996) into an understanding of the lived experience of leadership (Ibid; Day, 2,000) and a call for a process perspective (Yukl, 1989, 1998) to build knowledge from an individualised view of leadership development.

Thus the contribution of this research is towards an exploration of lived experience as leadership development through in-depth interviews of a small purposive sample; the associated research question is: **How have senior managers in a single organization learnt how to lead?**

## METHOD

### Methodology

A group of notable researchers (Kotter, 1988; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; McCall et al, 1988; McCall, 1998) have written extensively on the broad patterns of leadership development using large samples. However there is a clearly identified dearth of specific contextually based research (Day, 2000) and a call for a grounded qualitative approach into the “how” issues of leader development within a discrete context (Bryman, 1996; Parry, 1998). It is perhaps understandable why this question has not been addressed, as a significant issue has been identifying a method for eliciting tacit knowledge of “how” an individual has developed.

The methodological approach is shaped by critical realism. Critical realism encourages the use of appropriate methods in order to assist with the illumination of causal processes relevant to a particular situation (Sayer, 1992; Ackroyd, 2002; Easton, 1998). Grounded theory is utilised (Parry, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Glaser & Corbin 1990) in order to generate themes from the lived experiences of four directors. To understand the lived experience of leadership development, a phenomenological analysis (Hycner 1985) is undertaken for each individual from which inter-case comparisons are drawn in order to outline themes and explanations (Bhaskar, 1978; 1989a) of lived experience as leader development.

### Data Collection

The above methodology was enacted within a multinational PLC, through the interview of three directors operating at board level and the fourth director reporting to the board. These people will hereafter be called Les, Jo, Nic and Al (random names). All interviews took place at the organization, lasted for 60–90 minutes and were taped. Interviewees were advised of the research question at the outset and the interviews followed the following stages:

**Pre interview:** Interviewee asked to prepare a time line diagram (Kuhnert & Russell, 1990) of influences that have shaped their learning how to lead from their earliest memories to the present day.

**Stage One:** Interviewees asked to define and characterise their view of effective leadership.

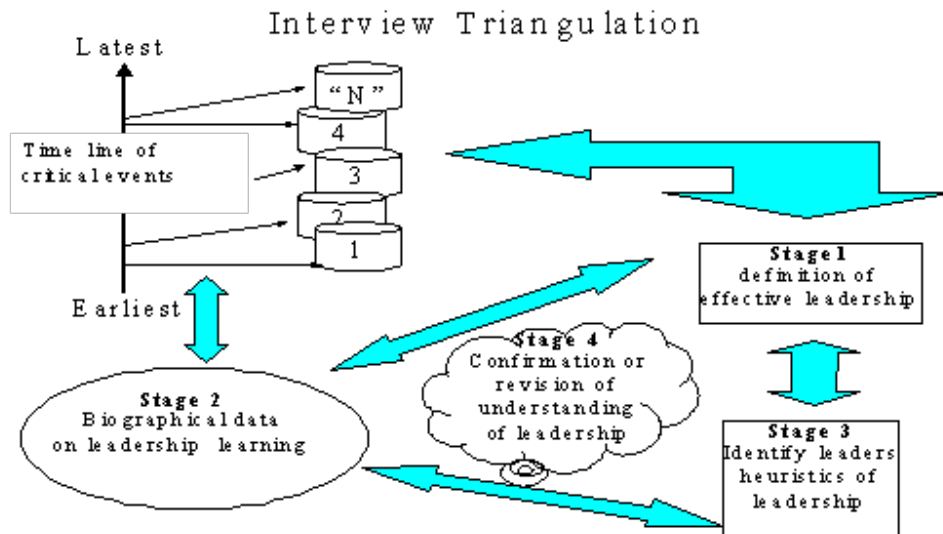
**Stage Two:** Biographical information: from the earliest memory to the present date

**Stage Three:** Indicative rules of thumb (heuristics) illustrating their approaches to leadership.

**Stage Four:** Final reflections on the definition of leadership in light of the discussion

The four stages of data collection are illustrated below in Figure One:

**Figure One**



This structure has been utilised in all of the four interviews throughout data collection in a desire to achieve triangulated respondent depth of reflection as well as generating reliable data. Triangulation, through these four stages, integrates the research design together as a holistic system of discussion from different perspectives and focusing on four styles of discussion: argumentation, narrative, description and reflection, echoing Denzin’s triangulation of sources (Denzin, 1970).

**Data Analysis**

Hycner’s (1985) method of phenomenological analysis has been utilized in conjunction with Parry’s (1998) framework for grounded theory development that reflects Bhaskars retroductive argument for identifying causal powers shaping phenomena (Bhaskar, 1989a) and is outlined in the following stages (*Hycner’s method is shown in brackets*):

1. Analytical chronology of the individual case
2. Diagnosis of the case (units of meaning and clusters of meaning)
3. Interpretive / theoretical outputs (intra-case themes)
4. Meta level analysis across cases (inter-case themes)
5. Explanation building (Yin, 1994)

**FINDINGS**

**Antecedents of leadership manifestation**

Four antecedent conditions have been identified that have shaped the manifestation of leadership to the four senior managers. Such manifestation is encapsulated in their understanding of effective leadership. This understanding varies in emphasis between each person around issues of direction, vision, motivation and communication to enhance performance. Even so, the presence of belief in the role and effectiveness of leadership is ubiquitous. Of most significance to all managers in their lived experience of leadership development is the impact of notable people.

**Antecedent Condition #1: Impact of notable people and critical episodes on leadership conception**

All four managers describe and anchor their learning about leadership from their experience with notable others and this is reflected in their perspective on leadership. For example, A1 provided one example of a person who had such an impact upon his learning, and the learning of others. A1 spoke of Kevin’s amazing

retention of people's names, *'He always knew a little bit about somebody just some little thing and believe me it is unbelievable hard to remember that sort of stuff'* and Kevin did this without apparent difficulty. It was *'uncanny'* and *'made people feel absolutely spectacular'* and *'it really did give people a lift'*. As a consequence of Kevin's influence, *'Everybody you talked to about Kevin that he touched like that will tell you he was bloody brilliant. He was one of the first MD's to be very personable and approachable'*.

The above impassioned comment from Al is rooted at the heart of his perspective of leadership and through his biographical account he centres his view of leadership oriented towards teams and people by describing the behaviour of notable people in leadership roles that have been beneficial or damaging to peoples motivations. McCall et al. (1988) identified the impact of notable people on the development of leaders. This finding was certainly reflected in the four biographies. The data, revealed through this research, identify the generative impact of notable people on leadership schemas and espoused heuristics in use when leading. This impact on learning is exemplified by Nic who commented on a period of time in Italy working with an Italian CEO, *'He would say 'remember, trying to get from A to B does not have to be a straight line'.* Extending this point Nic also reflected on being a young trainee, when his chief accountant *'said in a low voice, 'just remember that accountancy is an art not a science, you have to form an opinion you know'.* Such seemingly minor aspects of sense making had a lasting effect on interviewees.

Although all four people described critical incidents and episodes, the significance of which are rarely described and reflected upon in isolation from an experience with other people. For example Al emphasised a leadership episode that was *'the worst six weeks of my life'*. He recalled being angry at the way other people were treated. He wrote a list of things people had said to him that *'paints a picture of what it's like to work at "x" and I went through this and they laughed like buggery but it's real tragic because you have people that are living in this type of environment'*. He asked his role model leader for support to *'do whatever I have to do to sort this out, and in sorting it out, a lot of your managers over there are going to get pissed off'*. He recalled, that to the credit of his leadership role model, *'Ron and his team to a man said you've got our total support to do whatever you have to do'*.

The association between people and incidents in learning leadership appears to be significantly associated with social identity and a movement away from professional identities towards a leader identity.

## **Antecedent Condition #2: Identity development of self as leader**

Within all four case studies is the recognition both explicitly and implicitly of identity as a general manager and an aspirational identity as a leader. However there is a contrast in the recognition of identity as a general manager between Nic and the other three managers. The professional identity of Nic as an Accountant remained with him for a significant part of his biography and the influence of roles and notable people associated with these roles appears to have re-enforced both a professional identity and the centrality of task achievement. Referring to a CEO who had influenced his development, Nic emphasizes that *"he's not one of your charismatic leaders"* and describes an orientation *"around logic, results and driven by shareholder value"*. However it is interesting, and perhaps significant, to note on becoming a CEO Nic identified more with the role of leadership than towards his professional origins.

In contrast, the other three managers had strong identification as a general manager at a very earlier stage in their careers; throughout the interviews they expressed strong salience with the notion of leadership and the role of the leader in *"motivating people to achieve enhanced performance"* (Al). On numerous occasions salience of and identification with leadership was illustrated through examples of role models; Les commented about a previous CEO whose *"performance in fronting, taking the brunt of the outside world, and at the same time allow people inside the business to actually start the rebuilding process"*. He energetically concluded that it was *"A tremendous thing. Display of leadership"* and illustrates a further key theme that of teams by illustrating how such leadership *"instilled belief in the team was I think a tremendous display of leadership"*.

Identification of leadership with teams was a common theme of all case managers, particularly emphasized at increasingly senior levels. Jo commented: *"A leader is somebody who recognises that he needs the very best people working with him"*. He concluded that *"having identified those individuals you really need to ensure that the team as a whole is connected"*

A common view of the value of senior teams appears to be associated with judgment and problem solving of increasingly complex issues that are beyond functional experience. This was particularly noticeable with Nic and his development orientation towards the significance of constructing effective teams rather than relying on his professional experience as an accountant.

### **Antecedent #3: Social interaction of structure and agency**

Leadership conceptions illustrate antecedent interactions of the organizations structure and culture embodied in the manager's common interpretation. However such structure–culture–agency interaction also illuminates an evolving and emergent theme of generational perspectives of leadership identified with a shift in societal and organizational values, illustrated through a common example and rejection of bullying.

Appearing within the comments of all four managers was the explicit reference to the value of people and the abuse of power. Often this abuse of power was associated with autocratic style and the use of organisational authority. Al commented explicitly on the inappropriate way in which people were being treated in a particular episode of his career (described earlier, p.7). Jo commented that he had worked with some one who *“was a very hard task master. He explained how this manager “used to reduce half the staff, and particularly his secretary, into shivering wrecks”* and Jo had seen his role as sensitizing communications and there impacts: *“I often found myself in a position of translating what he meant into something slightly more palatable...he just had a very hard view on life and was very driven. Not surprisingly he was a project director by achieving goals and milestones”*

In a similar way Les commented on a particular manager who had been successful yet his style was very autocratic and unacceptable to him as despite being very committed *“he had very little room for other people's opinions and because of that he ended up appearing to be quite, quite a bully in the sense he ignored people and just drove on regardless.* Commenting on this leader he illustrated a change in style outside of work where *“he was a very personable individual but at work he struggled to listen to people and take on board their views”*.

Although the “bully” approach was recognised as being successful in particular roles in the past, there appears to be a shift in value orientation away from a task focus, and towards individuals and their motivations. It may be that within this organization the predominant managerial style had been autocratic and overwhelmingly performance driven, but this no longer valued by the four directors. Rather, humanistic qualities of being inclusive, approachable and team oriented are the espoused views of effective leadership that perhaps reflects broader contemporary societal norms of a social perspective against autocratic style and a humanist shift towards people centric perspectives, or a greater balance between task and consideration.

The interviews provided a voice for the managers to explain their views on leadership. This illustrates not only how they had been developed, notably via role models and incidents, but importantly gives a glimpse of how, as significant Directors privileged with power to influence and acting as corporate agents, they may be shaping or sustaining on going leadership development in the organization of the next generation of leaders.

### **Antecedent #4: Situated learning and corporate agency**

In each interview it was most apparent that the learning opportunities offered by the roles they enacted, placed them in participation with notable people and, through their participation, can be seen to be shaping meaning and social identity in this organisation. Al commented that *“it's just the nature of the function and you move into a more general management where you are dealing with a whole host of individual, so you get a different perspective”*.

Different perspectives of leadership have been generated through pathways of experience within the organization that has offered similar situated learning opportunities and interrelationship of participation and shared meaning generation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). There is no mention of learning to lead through formal interventions, rather the similarity of embedded understanding and approaches to leading quintessentially reflects situated learning theory that encompasses *“mind and lived in world”* (Fox; 1997 p.731) creating knowledge and learning simultaneously in interaction with the situation (Ibid).

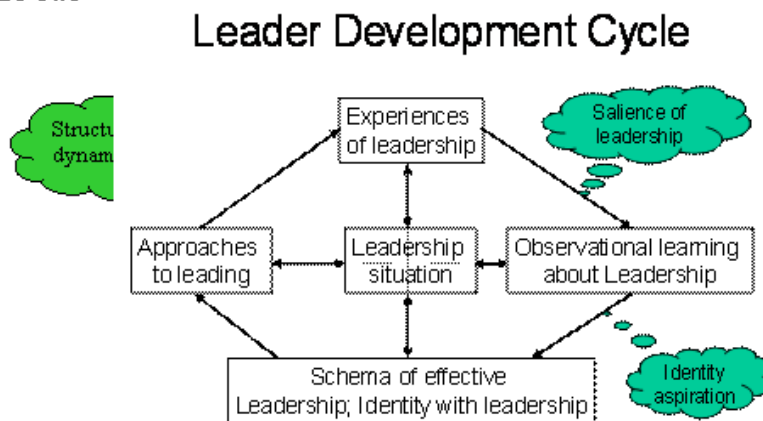
## Summary

These four directors have provided biographical detail of their careers that despite being idiosyncratic, have created a broad consensual perspective of leadership that reflects both the antecedents of the organization, and structural and cultural antecedents of a broader societal environment. Such antecedents have shaped the lived experience of leadership development within this organisation and this learning, embodied in the individual directors, continues to be ever present creating the lived experience for the next generation of leaders.

### LIVED EXPERIENCE AS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The findings and previous explanations are drawn together into a conceptualization of lived experience as leadership development. Figure two illustrates an emerging conception of leadership learning that draws upon the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) where reflection on action (Schon, 1983) makes sense of an experience from which conceptualization follows, that in turn is operationalized for subsequent application in further and similar experiences:

Figure Two



The above cycle of leadership learning is suggested to integrate together the key antecedents of lived experience identified in the case organization through the four interviews. The centrality of the situation and situated learning (antecedent four) is significant as it both shapes and is shaped by the agency actions of the actors in the situation (antecedent three). This suggests an evolving structure – agency dynamic that is continually creating and sustaining leadership development. The influence of identity and the saliency of leadership (antecedent two) influence the emergence of leadership and particularly the emergence of the leader as both corporate agent and actor (Archer, 1995: 2000). The case interviews have illustrated the significant impact of observational learning from notable others (antecedent one) on both how leaders conceive the process of leadership, and their approach to leading. Again this re-confirms the structure-agency perspective on lived experience (antecedent three) where notable people both sustain and innovative the emerging and on going lived experience of leadership development.

The highest-order category, which integrates the preceding four antecedent themes, is the primacy of the lived experience in explaining leadership development. The lived experience subsumes formal training and development and cognitive interventions (although the importance in shaping conceptions of leadership was severely limited). As such, they are elements of the lived experience, not in competition with the lived experience.

One notable contrast between the emergent themes and the extant theory is the striking dominance of notable people. This dominance differs from the extant literature which argues that experience in the form of

assignments in a variety of contexts dominate leadership learning (McCall, 1988). However the present research illuminates a different perspective to the learning process that interconnects the role of observational learning (Bandura, 1986) and identification with structural social theory of morphogenesis (Archer, 1995; 2000) and situated learning (Lave and Wegner, 1991).

Of note to the development of all four managers is the similarity of development influences within the organization of common identities, attributes, values and behaviours of notable people and subsequently of themselves related to leadership. The nature of seemingly common antecedent themes despite idiosyncratic biographies suggests the significance of structural processes shaping organizational leadership. The limited scope of divergence also reflects past patterns of development on previous generations of notable people as well as an evolving morphogenesis (Archer 1995), of leadership attributes being shaped by both organizational and societal changes, and reshaping through their own corporate agency actions. In essence, and echoing Margaret Archer's argument of the dualism between agency and structure notable people are both shaped by pre-existing social structures and culture and subsequently elaborate structures and culture that in turn shapes future leadership development - the rejection of bullies is a clear example of such morphogenesis (Ibid).

The importance of identity to the four case managers may be most significant in the leader development process and in particular interconnected with the impact of notable people. The impact of notable people to enable a corporate leader to symbolize the aspirational leadership identity (Gergen, 1971; 1989) for themselves of effective leadership and associate with that identity, may be a powerful learning mechanism (Bandura, 1986).

Associated with learning to become an identity and being able to conceptualise the phenomenon related to an identity, is the role of salience of identities Gergen (1971) catalyzed by a combination of personal association and value of the identity, linked to the situation in which the identity is valued and associated. In essence the salience of leadership as a social identity may become part of personal identity as a result of intense belonging and identification through engagement. Such engagement is associated with roles provided through legitimate participation in a particular situation (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Hence a cycle of learning driven from an interrelationship with the organizational situation offers a learning pathway of roles that enable managers to come in contact with notable others that formatively shapes their identity and learning to lead in a particular situation.

## CONCLUSION

The main contribution of the present methodology is in illuminating the importance of lived experience to leadership development. The present research identifies a learning cycle that interconnects the role of observational learning (Bandura, 1986) and identification with structural social theory of morphogenesis (Archer, 1995; 2000) and situated learning (Lave and Wegner, 1991). The notion of leadership learnt through socialisation and emergent apprenticeship offered in career pathways of participation (Lave and Wegner, 1991) and entwined within a dualist inter-relationship of agency and structure (Archer, 1995; 2000) may suggest significant issues for leader development intervention.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is a dearth of evaluation on the efficacy of leadership development interventions (Conger 1993) when the process of leadership development appears to be a phenomenon that is complex, long term, emergent and invisible. The informal process of lived experience as leadership development reflects elements that may be highly problematic to replicate in an effective and efficient manner through formal interventions. Perhaps, as Conger emphasizes, the key issue for formal interventions in leadership development should incorporate the opportunity for managers to reflect upon their personal experiences (Conger, 1993).

The authors acknowledge that the research findings and interpretations are limited to the context of a single organization and generalization is thus particularly limited and substantive only to the case organization. However the lived experience leadership development cycle and the associated antecedent influences could be a fruitful area for future research on leadership development in other organizational contexts that through comparison can help deepen understanding of informal leadership development.

Day (2000) comments that there is considerable interest among leadership development practitioners but surprisingly little scholarly interest in the topic (Day, 2000) and the Leadership Quarterly Ten Year Review (Lowe & Gardner, 2001) encourages greater research into the process of leadership development particular through qualitative approaches. It is hoped that this paper extends the debate and focus on informal leadership development.

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