



Am I a leader? Examining leader identity development over time



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2015

Received in revised form 16 January 2017

Accepted 17 January 2017

Available online 24 January 2017

Keywords:

Leader development

Leader identity

Leadership skills

Latent growth curve modeling

Latent change score analysis

ABSTRACT

The extent to which someone thinks of him- or herself as a leader (i.e., leader identity) is subject to change in a dynamic manner because of experience and structured intervention, but is rarely studied as such. In this study, we map the trajectories of leader identity development over a course of a seven-week leader development program. Drawing upon identity theory (Kegan, 1983) and self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), we propose that changes in self-perceived leadership skills are associated with changes in leader identity. Using latent growth curve modeling and latent change score analyses as our primary analytical approaches, we analyzed longitudinal data across seven measurement points ($N = 98$). We find leader identity to develop in a J-shaped pattern. As hypothesized, we find that these changes in leader identity are associated with, and potentially shaped by, changes in leadership skills across time.

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Leader development is inherently longitudinal (Day, 2011b) involving a process by which leaders acquire relevant experiences, skills, behaviors, and knowledge over time (Lord & Hall, 2005). Robust research evidence demonstrates the value and benefits of interventions in developing leaders (for review see Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009), but offers little insight into the longitudinal processes of leader development (Day & Dragoni, 2015). In addressing this oversight, leader identity has been proposed as a critical component of the leader development process (Day & Harrison, 2007). In proposing an integrative approach to leader development, Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) hypothesized that the observable, behavioral level of leadership skills is supported by deeper level mental structures, such as self-perception as a leader (i.e., leader identity). Nonetheless, the development of leader identity over time and its association with leadership skills have not been addressed in any detail in the empirical literature. We address these issues by focusing on intraindividual trajectories of leader identity over time (i.e., leader identity change). We use longitudinal modeling across seven measurement points to investigate leader identity change and its association with self-perceived leadership skills as a function of participation in a structured leader development program.

Identity can be conceptualized in various ways using a myriad of theoretical and methodological frameworks (see Miscenko & Day, 2016, for a comprehensive review of this literature). In the present study, identity refers to an individual's self-definition based on a relatively stable set of meanings associated with a particular role (Stryker & Burke, 2000), as compared with other conceptualizations of identity such as those grounded in social categories such as gender or race (e.g., Hogg, 2001) or those that view identity as part of an ongoing personal narrative striving for coherence (McAdams, 2006). Relatedly, it has been

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proposed that leader identity develops along four dimensions: (a) meaning, (b) strength, (c) integration, and (d) level (Hammond, Clapp-Smith, & Palanski, *in press*). In the present study, we focus on the dimensions of meaning and strength, as they are central to how we operationalize and measure leader identity. Meaning refers to the definition of leadership held by an individual (Burke, 2006) whereas strength refers to the extent to which an individual identifies as a leader. In this manner, leader identity incorporates connotations an individual assigns to a leadership role (i.e., meaning) and the degree of self-definition as a leader (i.e., strength).

Identity is important in the leader development process because it is thought to motivate individuals to seek out developmental experiences and opportunities to practice relevant leadership behaviors (Day et al., 2009). Recent theorizing has positioned leader identity as a proximal outcome of leader development, as leader identity links individual capabilities with more distal outcomes related to deep-level changes associated with adult development such as more complex meaning-making structures (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Lord & Hall, 2005). Correspondingly, we believe that the content of the focal leader development program prompts participants to engage in identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), which motivates leader identity change. Specifically, we propose that a leader development program presents a new set of identity meanings, which motivates participants to re-construct their currently held meaning of leader identity, and this will manifest in changing strength of leader identity (i.e., identity change). In addition, opportunities to practice leadership skills will strengthen an individual's self-perception as a leader and therefore motivate leader identity change.

Although research has greatly advanced our understanding of how individuals acquire and accumulate leadership skills over time (e.g., Dragoni, Oh, Vankatwyk, & Tesluk, 2011), we argue that skills-based approaches alone cannot capture the complex nature of leader development. Thus, here, we follow recent theoretical work that conceptualizes leader development as changes in both leadership skills and leader identity (Day et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). We investigate how self-perceived changes in leadership skills (i.e., initiating structure and consideration) relate to leader identity change (operationalized as changes in the strength of self-perception as a leader) among participants in a leader development program. We propose that leadership skills are inherently related to observed changes in leader identity and one of the primary aims of this research is to better understand that relationship. This is consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) whereby individuals draw inferences about their identity from perceptions of their own behavior. This theoretical framework is especially relevant to studying leader identity development because, we cannot know who we are until we see what we do (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). We use sophisticated longitudinal modeling techniques in the form of latent growth curve modeling (LGM) and latent change score (LCS) analyses to study the dynamic (and potentially reciprocal) relationships between leadership skills and leader identity change as a function of participation in a seven-week leader development program.

Overall, the present study contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. First, we track the development of leader identity over a period of two months by empirically mapping the underlying change trajectory across participants. Although leader identity has generated much interest among leadership researchers (e.g., Day & Dragoni, 2015; Van Knippenberg, 2011), few studies have investigated the longitudinal development of identity in the context of leader development programs, and most existing studies tend to be qualitative in nature (Andersson, 2012; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013). An exception is Day and Sin (2011) who assessed changes in leadership effectiveness over time and how those changes covary with leader identity (i.e., identity conceptualized as a time-varying covariate of effectiveness as a leader). The present study focuses on leader identity development as a proximal developmental outcome (Day & Dragoni, 2015), and hypothesizes and tests antecedents that are thought to predict leader identity change (e.g., leadership skills).

Second, we incorporate behavioral and information-processing theories of leadership by investigating how leadership skills relate to changes in leader identity over time. In doing so, we address criticism suggesting that different streams of leadership research have not been sufficiently integrated (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). This also allows us to more fully describe the process of leader development and complement the current literature that tends to focus on single dimensions of leader development.

Third, we respond to calls to more fully account for the role of time in leadership and the longitudinal nature of leader development (Day, 2011a; Riggio & Mumford, 2011). Because leader development represents a dynamic phenomenon, within-person research based on repeated measures offers the potential to greatly advance our understanding of the processes that underlie leader development (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Relatedly, we demonstrate the flexibility and usefulness of applying a novel analytical framework (Latent Change Score analysis; McArdle, 2009) in studying change-related issues in leader development research.

Conceptual background and hypotheses development

Leader identity change

Leader identity refers to the “sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader” (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365). As a type of cognitive schema, leader identity serves as a repository for information and knowledge attached to a leadership role (Lord & Hall, 2005), and directs an individual's behavior and interactions in leadership roles and processes (Day et al., 2009). For example, leader identities were found to relate uniquely to the frequency of transformational and abusive leader behaviors (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012), self- or group-serving behaviors (Giessner, Van Knippenberg, & Sleebos, 2009; Rus, Van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010), and others' perceptions of someone's leadership effectiveness (Day & Sin, 2011).

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