



In learning mode? The role of mindsets in derailing and enabling experiential leadership development

Peter A. Heslin*, Lauren A. Keating

UNSW Australia Business School, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2015

Received in revised form 17 October 2016

Accepted 17 October 2016

Available online 24 October 2016

Keywords:

Leadership development

Experiential learning

Mindsets

Motives

In learning mode

ABSTRACT

In comparison to the vast literature on leadership theories, concepts, and behaviors, relatively less is known about why leaders often learn little from their leadership experiences, as well as how to support them in doing so. We propose that leaders learn more from their challenging leadership experiences when they are *in learning mode*, defined as intentionally framing and pursuing each element of the experiential learning process with more of a growth than a fixed mindset. We describe how the extent to which leaders are in learning mode stems from salient mindset cues and guides whether they work through the experiential learning process with a predominantly self-improvement or self-enhancement motive. We theorize about several other likely mediators and moderators of when being in learning mode will manifest in experiential leadership development. Practical implications at the micro, meso, and macro levels, as well as within management education are outlined.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Learning to be an effective leader is an ongoing endeavor. Indeed, as Bennis (1994, p. 1) noted, “people who cannot invent and reinvent themselves must be content with borrowed postures, second-hand ideas, fitting in instead of standing out.” Although much has been written about how leaders need to continue honing their skills, the demand for effective leadership at all levels, as well as the prevalence of inept leadership, creates an imperative for more useful and efficient concepts to improve the quality of leadership development within all types of organizations (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014).

Leadership development research has shown that predisposed levels of leadership ability, intelligence, and personality influence early leadership effectiveness (e.g., Arvey, Zhang, Avolio, & Krueger, 2007; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Yet leadership competencies can also be cultivated over time. Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, and Avolio (2011) observed that leaders' self-efficacy and leadership performance can be enhanced by a comprehensive mentorship program. Leadership development may also be fostered by engaging in facilitated play (Kark, 2011), courses focused on reflection and personal development (Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011), and service-learning programs in developing countries (Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011). Challenging managerial assignments are arguably the most effective means for facilitating leadership development (Day & Dragoni, 2015), especially when focused on cultivating targeted competencies (Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, & Oh, 2009) and supplemented by leaders systematically reflecting on the insights they glean from such challenging experiences (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012).

* Corresponding author at: UNSW Australia Business School, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia.

E-mail address: heslin@unsw.edu.au (P.A. Heslin).

Relative to the voluminous literatures on leadership theories, behaviors, concepts, predictors, and skills (cf. Dinh et al., 2014; Yukl, 2012), much less is known about how to help leaders learn from their challenging experiences (McCauley, DeRue, Yost, & Taylor, 2014). This is a fundamental and consequential issue because learning from experience is neither automatic nor assured (Bandura, 1986; DeRue et al., 2012). From any particular developmental experience, one leader may learn a great deal while another learns little to nothing, or perhaps even the wrong lessons. Ashford and DeRue (2012) thus proposed that realizing the potential developmental value of challenging leadership experiences requires that leaders approach and deal with them mindfully; that is, in a manner whereby aspiring and actual leaders (henceforth simply “leaders”) are actively aware of themselves and their surroundings, open to new information, and systematically reflect upon their experiences from multiple perspectives.

To illuminate how leaders can learn from their challenging experiences, Ashford and DeRue (2012) developed a mindful engagement experiential learning process (henceforth simply “the experiential learning process”). They suggest that improvements in leadership effectiveness are likely to stem from leaders mindfully cycling through the following three experiential learning phases: (i) *approach*, by embracing a learning orientation and setting learning goals, (ii) *action*, by creating and capitalizing on learning opportunities via planning and conducting experiments; engaging in feedback seeking; and regulating their emotions, and (iii) *reflection*, which includes capturing the lessons of experience via diagnosing cause-and-effect, considering counterfactuals, and distilling the lessons learned.

Although the basis of the experiential learning process in learning and self-regulatory theory and research makes it a promising approach for facilitating leadership development, Ashford and DeRue's (2012) model seems to presume that after initially embracing a learning orientation and setting learning goals, individuals will move through the action and reflection phases in an open-minded and systematic way. However, when leaders encounter frustrating setbacks, they can readily become defensive and more concerned with bolstering their self-esteem than learning or working to improve their performance (Jordan & Audia, 2012; Kernis, 2003). DeRue et al. (2012) found that leaders reflect upon and learn from their challenging experiences when they have high conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability, and cognitive ability. Given the relative stability of personality and cognitive ability, such findings imply that leaders lacking requisite levels of these dispositions will learn less from experience-based leadership development initiatives, though do not address the within-person, dynamic issue of when a given leader will learn more (or less) from such experiences, or how s/he may be assisted in this regard.

To supplement Ashford and DeRue's (2012) experiential learning process by addressing these issues, we theorize about when leaders are prone to be more or less mindfully engaged in each aspect of the experiential learning process. We draw on three decades of theory and research in social, educational, and organizational psychology on mindsets; that is, an individual's implicit assumptions about the plasticity or fixedness of their personal attributes, labeled as growth and fixed mindsets, respectively (Dweck, 1986, 1999, 2012). Given that mindsets can be induced and readily changed, we suggest how mindset cues and leaders' resultant mindset can influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in ways that aid or impede their leadership development. We encapsulate the core of this theorizing by proposing the concept of being *in learning mode*, defined as intentionally framing and pursuing each element of the experiential learning process with more of a growth than a fixed mindset.

To theorize about how being in learning mode manifests in the way that leaders tackle their experiential leadership development tasks, we draw upon and extend performance feedback theory (Jordan & Audia, 2012) regarding the *self-enhancement* and *self-improvement* motives of managers when their performance is below their aspirations. We describe how a fixed mindset (i.e., assuming that required abilities are largely immutable) may incline leaders to adopt a self-enhancement motive (i.e., the desire to see oneself in a positive light; Fiske, 2004) that subsequently undermines experiential learning. By contrast, we suggest how a growth mindset (i.e., assuming that required abilities can be developed) may cue a self-improvement motive (i.e., the desire to increase one's capabilities and effectiveness; Fiske, 2004) that enables leaders to more seriously and systematically approach, tackle, and reflect upon their challenging leadership experiences.

This article is intended to make four scholarly contributions. First, in striving to enrich Ashford and DeRue's (2012) model of experiential leadership development, we integrate three largely disparate literatures to theorize about when leaders' engagement in the experiential learning process may be derailed or enabled. Specifically, we draw on social psychological (i.e., mindsets), performance feedback (i.e., self-enhancement versus self-improvement motives), and leadership development (i.e., experiential learning process) theory and research to suggest when leaders might be more or less mindfully engaged in experiential learning. In doing so, we extend Jordan and Audia's (2012) focus on motives in responding to feedback regarding decisions managers have made, which broadly aligns to the reflection stage of the experiential learning process. We do so by theorizing about how self-enhancement plays out during approach and action, as well as the reflection phases of experiential learning.

Second, in contrast to predominantly between-person depictions of what stems from mindsets within the extant mindsets literature, we model leaders' prevailing mindset as the fruit of the dynamic interplay between fixed and growth mindset cues within leaders and their social context. We propose that the extent to which leaders are in learning mode guides how mindfully engaged they are in the experiential learning process, by virtue of shaping the way leaders perceive themselves and focus their thoughts and actions in the context of challenging and potentially frustrating leadership experiences. Specifically, we explain how mindset cues prime assumptions (mindsets) that manifest in behavioral inclinations (motives) with regard to the tasks involved in experiential leadership development (Ashford & DeRue, 2012), as depicted in Fig. 1.

This figure illustrates how growth mindset cues may support approaching leadership experiences with the growth mindset and self-improvement motive that can foster experiential leadership development. Perhaps more importantly, Fig. 1 also illuminates how fixed mindset cues, a fixed mindset, and subsequent self-enhancement motive might function as unintended and perhaps even unrecognized impediments to experiential leadership development, by virtue of drawing leaders out of being in learning mode.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5035256>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5035256>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)