



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Promoting post-conventional consciousness in leaders: Australian community leadership programs

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 October 2013
Received in revised form 6 September 2014
Accepted 24 November 2014
Available online 15 December 2014

Handling Editor: Kevin Lowe

Keywords:

Leadership development
Community leadership
Washington University Sentence Completion Test
Ego development
Consciousness development

ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact on consciousness development of participating in either standard or enhanced community leadership programs (CLPs) in Australia. Aligned with Manners' and Durkin's (2000) conceptual framework, CLPs offer experiences that are interpersonal, emotionally engaging, personally salient and structurally disequilibrating for later conventional consciousness stages. Enhanced CLPs include additional psychosocial challenges. Participants were 335 adults who took part in one of 4 standard CLPs, 7 enhanced CLPs and 2 (control) management programs. Modal program length was 10 months. Standard and enhanced CLPs were successful in facilitating consciousness development (as measured by the Washington University Sentence Completion Test—WUSCT) within the conventional stages. However, enhanced CLPs were significantly more successful in triggering post-conventional development, and specifically in those participants who had a preference for Sensing (as measured by the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator—MBTI). Enhanced CLPs could provide a model for other development programs aimed at promoting post-conventional consciousness.

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Introduction

Humanity clearly needs to come to terms with the complexity and urgency of our adaptive global and local challenges. These challenges involve multiple systems and threats in which the solution to one part of the problem may unintentionally exacerbate another (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Adaptive issues cannot be solved with technical expertise—no matter how 'state-of-the-art'. Nor can they be solved with charismatic or single minded leadership—no matter how alluring these qualities may seem in times of uncertainty. As Kegan (1994) noted "The expectations upon us [in modern life]...demand something more than mere behaviour, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on *how* we know, on the complexity of our consciousness" (p. 5). We are, as he asserted, 'in over our heads' with the kinds of adaptive challenges we are facing today; our 'conventional' consciousness is not geared to respond effectively.

Once the purview of education and counselling programs, adult constructive development theory and research has recently begun to impact the field of management and leadership (Laske, 2003; McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor, & Baker, 2006). Constructive developmental theory focusses on how individuals construct their understanding of self (consciousness)—the principles by which they make meaning. As meaning-making capacity expands, so does the capacity to cope with complexity and ambiguity, to self-reflect, to collaborate more effectively with diverse others, view problems holistically and engage with them courageously and creatively (Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2004). Increasingly, these capacities are seen as the drivers of success in leadership (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2013).

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Constructive developmental theorists argue that resolution of the 21st-century adaptive challenges we are facing in our organisations, communities and at a global level, require a fundamental mind shift in leadership; not just an alternative set of views about the world, but an alternative way of arriving at such views (Donovan, 1997). This new way of thinking and comprehending must transcend the interests of any one individual, group or country (Hewlett, 2004). It must recognise the ways in which our realities are constructed and integrate multiple perspectives and multiple systems to challenge existing ways of thinking (Palus & Drath, 1995). It must take a long-range perspective, be willing to experiment, and have the high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty that will be required for generating alternative futures. These are the capacities that have been found to evolve at postconventional levels of development (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Hewlett, 2004; Kegan, 1994; Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994). Now more than ever, the world needs leaders who operate from post-conventional consciousness because of their transformational capacity, agility, creativity, flexibility and mature insight (Barker & Torbert, 2011; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Rooke & Torbert, 2005).

This research explored whether development to post-conventional consciousness could be facilitated within Australian community leadership programs. Such programs are similar to those run by the American Leadership Forum and the UK's Common Purpose. There are currently around 18 such programs operating out of capital cities and regional centres around Australia with a combined total of more than 6000 graduates. Attracting diverse groups of emerging and established leaders, such programs may be an important way in which to assist a broad range of individuals to develop their consciousness and to create a 'snowball' effect of higher level thinking that, as Donovan (1997) suggested, is dispersed throughout the institutions, systems and structures of our societies and eventually lifts everyone's capacity. They may also provide a model for the development of other programs aimed at supporting people to transform their current way of making sense of the world.

Table 1
Stages of consciousness development.

Tier	Stage	Typical manifestations
Preconventional	(impulsive)	Dependent on others for control. Physical needs and impulses. Others understood in simple dichotomies (good and bad, clean and dirty etc.). Rules poorly understood.
	Opportunist (self-protective)	Fragile self-control. Short time horizon (hours to days). Focus on concrete things. Deceptive, manipulative, exploitive. Preoccupied with staying out of trouble, not getting caught; externalising blame. Lacking long term goals and ideals. See life as a 'zero sum game'. Views luck as central. Rejects critical feedback. 4.3% found to be at this stage by Cook-Greuter (2004).
Conventional	Diplomat (conformist)	Group-centred and imitates behaviour of high status group members/authority. Rules and norms accepted without question. What is conventional and socially approved is 'right' (although may also rigidly conform to some unconventional norms to fit in with a particular group). Preoccupation with reputation, social acceptance, appearance and material things. People (including the self) perceived in terms of stereotypes. Conceptually simple, 'black and white' thinking. Feelings understood at banal level. Use of clichés, favourite phrases and pre-fabricated jokes. One week to 3-month time horizon. 11.3% at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).
	Expert (self-aware)	Distinction between self and group. Allows some modification of absolute rules, but stage is basically a later version of Diplomat. Concentrates on mastery of one or more particular crafts or disciplines. Desire to stand out, be unique. Perfectionist. Increased, though still limited, self-awareness and appreciation of multiple possibilities in situations. Relationships described in terms of feelings (not just actions). Self-critical but accepts external feedback only from acknowledged craft masters. Values decisions based on technical merit. Humour tends to practical jokes. Six month to 1-year time horizon. 36.5% at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).
	Achiever (conscientious)	Self-evaluated standards. Achievement is highly valued. Reflective, responsible and empathic. Strives to improve the self. Thinking beyond personal concerns to those of society. Displays and perceives true conceptual complexity. Can see the broader perspective and can discern patterns. Principled morality. Mutuality in relationships. Self-critical. Welcomes behavioural feedback. One to 3-year time horizon. 29.7% at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).
Postconventional	Individualist (individualistic)	Heightened sense of individuality. Takes a relativistic perspective. Interested in own and others unique self-expression. Tolerant of self and others. May become a maverick. Awareness of inner conflicts and personal paradoxes, without a sense of resolution or integration. Values relationships over achievement. May provide less certainty and less firm leadership to followers as aware of the layers of assumptions and interpretations at work in current situation. Possible paralysis in decision-making. 11.3% found at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).
	Strategist (autonomous)	Self-awareness in action. Intuitively recognises other and own stages and accesses all of these creatively to achieve desired outcomes. Reframes issues and seeks transformational solutions. Deepened respect for other people—their individuality and uniqueness and their need to find their own way/make their own mistakes. Relationships seen as interdependent rather than as dependent/independent. Tolerance for ambiguity and the recognition of paradoxes (including inner conflicts). Search for self-fulfilment/self-actualisation. Vivid expression of feelings. Witty existential humour. 4.9% found at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).
	Alchemist (construct aware/integrated)	Self-actualising. Starts to see own thought and language habits and become aware of profound splits and paradoxes inherent in rational thought. Aware of ego defences for self-preservation. 'Peak experiences' or 'flow states' may be experienced. Often play key roles in many organisations at once. Intentional participation in the work of historical/spiritual transformation. 2.0% found at this stage (Cook-Greuter, 2004).

Adapted from Hy and Loevinger (1996), Manners and Durkin (2001), Cook-Greuter (1999, 2004), Marko (2006) and Torbert et al. (2004). Brackets indicate Loevinger's original stage names.

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