



Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory

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ABSTRACT

The development of effective leaders and leadership behavior is a prominent concern in organizations of all types. We review the theoretical and empirical literature on leader and leadership development published over the past 25 years, primarily focusing on research published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. Compared to the relatively long history of leadership research and theory, the systematic study of leadership development (broadly defined to also include leader development) has a moderately short history. We examine intrapersonal and interpersonal issues related to the phenomena that develop during the pursuit of effective leadership, describe how development emerges with an emphasis on multi-source or 360-degree feedback processes, review longitudinal studies of leadership development, and investigate methodological and analytical issues in leader and leadership development research. Future research directions to motivate and guide the study of leader and leadership development are also discussed.

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1. Introduction and overview

Leadership development has emerged as an active field of theory building and research, providing a more scientific and evidence-based foundation to augment the long-standing practitioner interest in the topic. This emergence has transpired primarily over the last 10 to 15 years and *The Leadership Quarterly* has played a major role as an important outlet for this work. The purpose of this article is to review those advances, highlight their respective contributions, and identify areas in need of future research.

The purpose of this review is to identify advances in scholarly approaches to leader development (intrapersonal, focused on individual leaders), leadership development (interpersonal, focused on enhancing leadership capacity), and related topics that have been featured in this journal over the previous 25 years. The good news is that much has changed. There have been significant contributions to understanding leadership development (broadly defined to also include leader development) as well as multi-source or 360-degree feedback processes. The latter represent important process tools for enhancing leadership development. Although a lot of new knowledge has been generated in the previous 25 years, there is much more that needs to be learned. For that reason we will review the articles and special issues in *The Leadership Quarterly* since its beginning that have contributed to these scholarly advances. We will also highlight areas where additional focus is needed in terms of building a stronger evidence-based foundation for leadership development and feedback processes.

We begin by elaborating on how and why leadership development is different from the broader field of leadership theory and research. In doing so, we wish to demonstrate that more fully understanding leadership development goes far beyond merely

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choosing a particular leadership theory and training people in behaviors related to that theory. Leadership development is a complex topic that is deserving of scholarly attention with regard to theory and research independent of what has been studied more generally in the field of leadership.

The structure of this review is as follows. First, the content or the “what” of leadership development will be examined to summarize the phenomena that develop and what factors play a role in developing successful leadership skills and potential. This section will include *intrapersonal* factors (mainly relevant to leader development) as well as *interpersonal* factors (relating more to leadership development). Second, we consider process issues or the “how” in leadership development. The goal of this section is to describe the ways in which leadership development emerges in organizations and the practices that can be implemented to facilitate effective leadership. Third, we review a series of recent pieces that address aspects of longitudinal studies of leadership development. These are theoretical and empirical contributions that provide valuable insights into the longitudinal nature of leadership development. Fourth, we investigate how leadership development has been assessed or evaluated in the literature, thus promoting a scholarly understanding of evaluation methods in leadership development research. We conclude with an agenda for future research on the topic of leadership development. Whereas many of the pieces we review overlap multiple categories, our hope is that this structural framework provides a clear yet comprehensive understanding of the relevant theory and research pertaining to leadership development.

2. Leader and leadership development: research and theory

There is a relatively long history of leadership theory and research spanning more than a century (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009); however, in comparison, there is a fairly short history of rigorous scholarly theory and research on the topics of leader and leadership development. As noted by Day (2000), the distinction between developing leaders and developing leadership is potentially an important one. Leader development focuses on developing individual leaders whereas leadership development focuses on a process of development that inherently involves multiple individuals (e.g., leaders and followers or among peers in a self-managed work team). But given the keen attention paid to leadership theory historically, there appears to be a widespread misperception that if that the field could just identify and agree on the “correct” leadership theory then the development piece would inevitably follow. It turns out that this is not so simple. Developing individual leaders and developing effective leadership processes involve more than simply deciding which leadership theory is to be used to motivate effective development. This is so because human development involves a complex set of processes that need to be understood. Given that individual leader development occurs in the context of ongoing adult development (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009), we need to focus on development as much as leadership to shed light on how this process unfolds.

One of the reasons leadership theory and research have contributed little to leadership development is a long-standing focus linking personality with leadership. If personality is conceptualized in terms of traits that summarize relatively enduring dispositional tendencies (House, Shane, & Herold, 1996), then its relevance for studying development (i.e., change) is questionable. Another popular approach in leadership research that is likewise limited in its developmental usefulness is the behavioral approach. Although behaviors can be learned, the primary intervention focus associated with leadership behaviors tends to be based on training rather than on longer-term development initiatives. Training typically involves providing proven approaches to solve known problems but the challenges facing contemporary leaders tend to be too complex and ill-defined to be addressed successfully through such relatively short-term training interventions. As a result of these challenges, the nascent fields of leader and leadership development tend to focus less on leadership theory and more on developmental science. In other words, there has been a change in focus associated with studies of leadership development broadly defined, away from leadership research and toward understanding and enhancing developmental processes.

Another important difference is that the nature of leadership development is inherently multilevel and longitudinal (Day, 2011). Specifically, studying development involves mapping and understanding within- and between-person change patterns – as well as those involving groups, teams, and larger collectives – over time. To contribute to greater understanding of how leaders and leadership processes develop and change, relevant theory and research should reflect both the multilevel and the longitudinal nature of development. This longitudinal, multilevel focus means that intrapersonal and interpersonal processes are central to leadership development over time.

3. Intrapersonal content issues in development

In terms of intrapersonal content (see Table 1 for a summary), a relevant question is what develops as a function of leader development? Additionally, are there individual differences that affect these interventions? Researchers such as Lord and Hall (2005) have noted the importance of individual identity in developing leadership skills and expertise as part of the leader development process. Other researchers have examined issues of cognitive and metacognitive skills at the core of leadership potential (Marshall-Mies et al., 2000), as well as various approaches to understanding the underlying patterns of leadership skills (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000; Mumford et al., 2000). Moreover, the role of personality has also been examined as a predictor of leadership styles (deVries, 2012) as well as leader performance (Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). All of these issues involving skills, experience, learning, and personality are central to the notion of developing the expert leader (Day et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). Research and theory on leader self-development also contribute to our conceptual understanding of intrapersonal content issues.

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