



Propensity for self-development of leadership attributes: Understanding, predicting, and supporting performance of leader self-development

Lisa A. Boyce^{a,*}, Stephen J. Zaccaro^a, Michelle Zazanis Wisecarver^b

^a Department of Psychology, George Mason University, United States

^b U.S. Army Research Institute, Arlington, Virginia, United States

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ABSTRACT

Little systematic research has been reported to advance understanding of the characteristics associated with individuals who initiate self-development activities to grow leadership skills. The purpose of the present research was to examine cognitive, dispositional, and motivational precursors to the propensity to engage in leadership self-development. A second purpose was to examine the role of organizational support on the relationships between self-development propensity and reported self-development activities. Over 400 junior-military leaders participated in a three-stage survey administration designed to test a structural model of leader self-development. Results indicate that a person having individual characteristics related to mastery, work, and career-growth orientations displayed more motivation to perform leader self-development and more skilled at performing instructional and self-regulatory processes. Higher self-development motivation and skill resulted in greater reported self-development activities. Surprisingly, organizational support reduced the magnitude of this relationship. This study concludes with implications for future research on and practice of leader self-development activities.

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Leader development generally occurs through three mechanisms—formal instruction, work assignments, and self-directed learning (Day & Zaccaro, 2004; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004; Zaccaro, Wood, & Herman, 2006). Traditionally, most organizations have generally offered formal training programs as their primary approach to such development. Day (2000, p. 586) cited a report by the American Society for Training and Development indicating “that 85% of companies that engage in leadership development activities use formal classroom programs.” While formal instruction represents an important component of the leader development process (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), such programs are expensive and, because they typically take place off work sites, suffer from relatively poor transfer (Day, 2000; Hall, 1996). Accordingly, researchers and practitioners in leader development have increasingly emphasized contextualized development strategies, such as the use of developmental assignments, on-the-job learning, coaching and mentoring relationships, and action learning assignments (Day, 2000; Ohlott, 2004; VanVelsor & McCauley, 2004).

Over the last decade, organizations and their leaders have experienced sweeping changes in the workplace, including rapid technological advancements, increased globalization, shifting organizational structures, and dynamic career patterns (Ilgen & Pulakos, 1999; Kraut & Korman, 1999). These changes have resulted in rapid shifting of leader performance requirements, and in turn requiring flexible development strategies that permit more immediate expansion of human capital (Ellinger, 2004). Accordingly, organizations and their leaders have sought alternative means of developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to succeed in a dynamic environment. This dynamic has prompted more organizations to place greater responsibility for personal development on their leaders (Van Velsor, Moxley, & Bunker, 2004). That is, companies are shifting more of their focus to the third avenue of leader development—self-development.

* Corresponding author. Institute for Information Technology Applications, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 80840, United States. Tel.: +1 719 471 7936.

E-mail address: lisa.boyce@usafa.edu (L.A. Boyce).

¹ Now at the Institute for Information Technology Applications, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado.

Both organizations and individual leaders understand the utility of self-directed development in growing leadership capacities. Organizations are recognizing that to be competitive they must promote and rely on their leaders to engage in self-directed learning (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang, & Howton, 2002; Kozlowski & Farr, 1988). Also, employees who participate in self-development activities are reported to be more productive (Gould & Penley, 1984) and effective (Temporal, 1982). In addition, because today's leaders are more likely to work in multiple organizations during their careers, and switch organizations more rapidly than in the past, maintaining professional proficiency becomes a greater personal responsibility (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1999).

Despite this growing need for professional self-development, few studies have focused on this avenue of leader development. Indeed, research on more general self-development, particularly empirical studies, is rather sparse in the organizational literature. For example, Maurer and Tarulli (1994) noted, "although many constructs have been identified as being relevant in career development or employee development, very few empirical studies have been conducted to explicitly examine these constructs for relationships with interest and participation in voluntary development activity in organizational settings" (p. 3). Nearly a decade later, little had changed, as Maurer, Weiss, and Barberite (2003) noted that, "there is a relatively small amount of research that has pursued an understanding of the variables associated with employee involvement in learning and development activities related to work" (p. 707; see also Simmering, Noe, Colquitt, & Porter, 2003). With respect to self-development activities focused on leadership, Yukl (2006, p. 409) stated that

Unfortunately, there is almost no empirical research on the effectiveness of self-learning techniques (Baldwin & Padgett, 1993). We know little about the benefits derived from them or the extent to which they can substitute for formal instruction. Research is needed to evaluate how much self-help activities contribute to the development of leadership competencies, and the conditions under which these activities are most effective.

Most of the recent summaries of research on leader development substantiate this observation, as few of them provide explicit and systematic treatment of self-development as a form of leader growth, although most imply self-directed learning as a key component of other more formalized training strategies (e.g., Day, 2000; Day, Zaccaro & Halpin, 2004; Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; London, 2002; McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004).

In response to this lack of research, the present study examines several issues related to self-development, particularly the self-development of leadership capacity. We examine a model of leader self-development that specifies the personal characteristics that enhance one's propensity to engage in leader self-development activities. A limited set of empirical studies have examined individual characteristics as predictors of more generic forms of self-initiated development (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Maurer et al., 2003; Noe & Wilk, 1993; Simmering et al., 2003). Most of these focused on those individual characteristics that explain one's motivation to engage in self-development. The present study builds on these studies, but adds one's *ability to effectively construct and complete the self-learning process* as a second class of predictors (an exception: Birdi et al., 1997, examined learning confidence as a predictor, which included one's perceived ability to learn, but found no relationships with voluntary development activities). Thus, we construe the quality and quantity of self-development activities as deriving from one's *propensity* to engage in self-development, which in turn is predicted by both motivation and ability to self-develop.

In this study, we also examine organizational support for self-development as a predictor interacting with propensity to influence the actual initiation of self-development activities. While some studies have focused on organizational support as a predictor in self-directed development (Birdi et al., 1997; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994), these studies have generally treated this construct as a perceptual variable predicting learning motivation. In the present study we manipulated levels of provided organizational support in the form of a leader self-development guidance tool purportedly made available by the organization. Such support should moderate the degree to which one's propensity to engage in self-development actually results in self-development activities. Thus, our treatment of support more closely fits the interactionism model that proposes work-related learning as a joint function of person and environment factors (Kozlowski & Farr, 1988).

Our focus here is on leader self-development. However, we do not mean to argue at this point that a model of such development differs substantially or meaningfully from more generic models of self-development. We would note one possible key difference, though. Most self-directed learning activities focus on fairly defined and limited knowledge and behavioral domains. For example, such learning can target the acquisition of new technological expertise (Kozlowski & Farr, 1988), as well as the expansion of knowledge about a specific organizational domain, the attainment of new behavioral skills (e.g., time management or communication skills), or the elaboration of current skills (Sessa & London, 2006). Development of leadership capacity, however, targets a domain that is more complex and diffuse, involving multiple and integrated simple and complex skill components. We suspect that certain self-development processes such as self-appraisal and the specification of a self learning curriculum may be more difficult to complete when concerned with growing leadership capacity than when focused on more narrow and prescribed skill sets. Accordingly the individual characteristics that predict the effectiveness of these particular self-development processes may carry more predictive weight in a model of leader self-development than in a more general model of self-development. Nonetheless, our intent here is to examine a general model of self-development that focuses on the learning of leadership skills. Our purpose is to provide some empirical evidence that is currently lacking in the leader development domain.

1. Modeling performance of leader self-development activities

Fig. 1 presents the model of leader self-development that was tested in the present study. We hypothesized five clusters of individual characteristics as predictors of an individual's propensity for engaging in activities to grow leadership competencies.

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