
The Leadership Development Interface: Aligning Leaders and Organizations Toward More Effective Leadership Learning

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Abstract

The Problem.

Leadership Development research and practice has consistently focused on specific methods and interventions to the degree that our understanding of what good leadership development looks like is much clearer. The problem however, with current thinking on leadership development and the evaluation of leadership development is that we are not exploring the extent to which the individual leader and the organization they work for are connected and aligned. For evaluators of leadership development this exploration is a key aspect in measuring the systemic nature of leadership development and not merely the intervention. How do individual leaders navigate their personal leadership development journey and how do the organizations for which they work interface with them to provide effective development opportunities and practice?

The Solution.

This article makes the case that we need to evaluate and articulate the leadership development process differently; to move away from isolated methods and toward an interconnected process of personal and organizational discovery and learning. When leaders and organizations activate the interconnectedness of leadership development, learning may become more reciprocal and aligned which could drive better development outcomes and value. The Leadership Development Interface Model, developed through research and literature data, provides an interconnected

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perspective of leadership development and explores a “whole system” view so both leaders and organizations can engage, plan, and evaluate their development effort in an aligned and supported way.

The Stakeholders.

Leaders and their direct managers in organizations, HR and development specialists

Keywords

leadership, leadership development, organizational learning, employee development

Leadership Development conjures up a host of literature, interventions and theories for both individuals and organizations trying to build leadership capability. Traditionally leadership and leadership development theory has concerned itself with the individual in ascertaining the specific traits, behaviors and competencies leaders need to possess and develop to be effective (Yukl, 2002). In essence, the theoretical perspective of leadership and leadership development has mostly been focused on deconstructing the leadership phenomenon into parts of the whole. This theoretical focus along with the advent of contingency theories that provide the view of the situation and the context in which leadership occurs have significantly contributed to the understanding of leadership (Drazin & Van de Ven, 1985). As well, these leadership theories helped inform the relational aspect of leadership development between the leader and the follower.

However, what has not been duly explored in leadership development is the relational aspect of leadership development beyond the leader–follower dyad. Indeed, leadership development is proving to be iterative, multirelational and contextual (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002) and we need to be able to help leaders and organizations navigate leadership development as a connected and multifaceted frame and not simply as linear processes (Lowe & Gardner, 2001). This article makes the case that we need to have different conversations, a navigational frame to go beyond a static list of leadership development activities toward how development activities interface with the needs and context of individuals and organizations (Petrie, 2011). Leaders and organizations cite many leadership development challenges such as accountability, application, feedback and methods and it is clear that often leaders and organizations have differing views of how these aspects of leadership development will play out from their perspective (Hanson, 2007). Yet we continue to offer up a plethora of leadership development interventions without first understanding and evaluating this important interfacing relationship from an alignment perspective. In essence, before we “do” leadership development, we need to articulate a whole leadership development system so both leaders and organizations can map their development effort in an aligned and supported way.

This article will first explore how we have categorized and explained leadership development through the lens of leader development and leadership development. Building from this perspective, the article introduces a four quadrant leadership

development interface model that connects leader and leadership development with individuals and the organizations for which they work. The model tests the assumption that an aligned systemic view of the leadership development interface will lead to more effective and measurable leadership development outcomes. The leadership development model will also be offered as an evaluation tool for leadership development stakeholders in the design and process of leadership development. Finally, implications of the findings moving forward for the key stakeholders and the evaluation of leadership development will be discussed.

Leader Development Versus Leadership Development

David Day made the case some years ago that leadership development continues to focus on two main areas; the leader within and leadership in action (Day, 2001). This distinction is important because leading is both an internal process of personal discovery of values and beliefs and an external action of influencing, directing, and building teams and organizations. Leader and leadership development is also an important construct in the plural nature of developing leaders. In essence it is an “and” proposition and not an “or” proposition when building leadership talent. One cannot do leader development without doing leadership development as well, they are interconnected, linked and both are important when constructing learning interventions (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004).

Leader Development

From a leader development perspective the research suggests that leading starts with the individual from an intrapersonal perspective in building self-awareness around values, beliefs, character, spirit, and personality (Tichy, 1997). The focus of the individual in development assumes a leader is the sum of his or her life experiences and comes into a leadership role with a conscious or unconscious philosophy of life and leading authentically (Avolio & Luthans, 2006). These are the internal drivers and intentions of leaders which focus on their values, beliefs, and well-being.

Suffice to say, that if a leader is to be effective he or she must develop the leader within (Bennis, 1995). This notion that a leader needs to lead his or herself through personal understanding and philosophy as well as seeing his or her whole life as part of the leadership journey is critical because leading in action such as building relationships and trust comes from a leader’s self-orientation (Green & Howe, 2012). This internalized view of the leader also ensures vitality in an organization’s leader pipeline whereby leaders know why and how they lead from an attitude and mindset perspective (Ready & Conger, 2007). Self-exploration, self-affirmation, internalized thinking and feeling processes are all focus areas in this arena of internal leader development. They are seen as crucial because the effect an individual leader has can either be positive or negative given their personal grounding and internal anchors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

This frame of leader development also requires the input from others through feedback and observation. Leader development requires individuals to have a feedback orientation which means they invite guidance and coaching to help understand internal motivations and perspective (London & Smither, 2002). Insight from others helps direct philosophical introspection, fundamental truths and inherent motivation of a leader (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2005). It is like the metaphor of putting a mirror up for leaders as a key mechanism in making personal shifts in understanding why a leader does or does not change their behavior and approach when it comes to leading (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Leader development therefore occur when an individual is receptive to organizational feedback loops and are motivated to shift and change personal values and beliefs about leading (Alldredge & Nilan, 2000). Leaders also often need guidance to ascertain feedback meaning and opportunities for improvement (Goldsmith, Lyons, & Freas, 2000). Organizations need to show how the feedback fits with what the organization is expecting of the leader from all stakeholders that the leader interacts with. This suggests organizations need to facilitate what the feedback means and what the leader can do about the feedback they receive (Rosti & Shipper, 1998).

Leadership Development

Leadership development proposes that leadership can be broken down into teachable aspects and learned through formal and informal interventions (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). Leadership development builds on the transactional and transformational nature of leadership and the connections and networks of social systems in which leadership is displayed. This view of development typically surrounds how one leads others and what one leads to impact organizational success. This social view directs leadership development into building those interactive, technical, and connective skills required in the process of leading organizational strategy and operations as well as leading people and teams (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006). To build leadership capabilities, organizations and individuals are turning to different types of intervention methods. Sometimes these leadership development interventions are stand alone or sometimes they are connected as a “menu” of connected interventions. The summary in Table 1 is by no means an exhaustive list of this domain in the leadership development research and methods, but it tries to provide a brief overview of some of the mainstream thinking and literature on how leadership development is approached in organizations.

Much of the research on the methods in Table 1 has focused on the process and effectiveness of these methods in building leadership capability. The challenge of these types of leadership development interventions is that they have a “this then that” and “this or that” framework forming a building block approach that is both incremental and linear. However, leadership development is more dynamic than linear, more “this related and aligned to that” and becoming more of an exercise in sense making and a process of creating shared meaning. The question of leadership development is changing from: How one effectively develops leadership to how one can participate productively in all of the leadership processes (Day, 2001).

Table 1. Leadership Development Methods

Leadership competency frameworks	Competencies describe leadership as qualities or behaviors allowing leadership to be isolated as parts rather than a whole (Naquin & Holton, 2006). Competencies can also be measured of adequacy or qualification of capacity (Conger & Ready, 2004).
Traditional leadership development programs	A classroom type setting of discussion, case studies, models, role plays and lectures (Conger, 1992).
Action learning	Working on real organizational issues or projects to practice leadership competencies (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Froiland, 1994).
Leadership development through experience	Placing individuals in actual stretch leadership roles through succession or development positions (Adey, 2000; Bush & Glover, 2004; Day & Halpin, 2001).
"360 degree" feedback	This type of feedback from stakeholders such as subordinates, peers, and supervisors offers assessment and measurement of leadership competencies and focus for areas to develop (Atwater & Waldman, 1998; Rosti & Shipper, 1998).
Executive coaching	A facilitating third party (internal or external to the organization) assists an individual identifying, planning and implementing development activities to gain or increase leadership competence (Hansford, Tennent, & Ehrich, 2002; Kilburg, 2000).

Organizational Context and Leader and Leadership Development

Most research into leader and leadership development recognizes the need for practice in real settings as critical to leadership development (Bush & Glover, 2004). Given this reality, little research attention has been paid to the context of the organization's purpose and the interfacing relationships between leaders and organizations required in sustaining and enhancing leader and leadership development (Olivares, Peterson, & Hess, 2007). Indeed the key role the organization plays in developing leadership in individuals and how one cannot exist nor execute effective leadership development without the other is a necessary connection to the effective development of leaders (Ready & Conger, 2003). How individuals engage and find leadership development meaning and what organizations expect and offer from a leader and leadership development perspective is the antecedence for the leadership development interface model.

The Leadership Development Interface Model

The leadership development interface model emerged from two academic research studies (Hanson, 1999, 2007). These explorations were guided by the question of why leadership development interventions work for some but not for others in the context of applied leadership in organizational settings. How do the relational interfaces of leader and leadership development connect and align to individual and organizational perspectives? Through a series of qualitative interviews with leaders at all levels of global companies and leadership development specialists inside and outside organizations along with a rigorous literature review around leadership and

leadership development, the leadership development interface model was constructed. Validity of the leadership development interface model was grounded in qualitative research methods which included theoretical sampling and iterative qualitative interviews which allowed unknown inquiry avenues to emerge. As well, the fieldwork interviews that led to the interface model were recorded, transcribed and audited to ensure the subjects words and meaning were represented. Through analysis of the data and the literature, the relationship between individuals and organizations and the distinction between leader and leadership development provides the frame from which a holistic leadership development interface can be explored (see Figure 1).

The intersection between the individual and the organization and leader and leadership development reveals the four key elements and definitions of the leadership development interface. The interface tries captures the holistic nature of leadership development in both activity and accountability of individuals and organizations. It also provides the engagement areas for leader and leadership development. The leadership development interface is where leadership development interventions can be sorted and linked such that the nature of a leadership or leader development activity can be observed and connected to how it fits as a whole in a leadership development system. Given the breadth of best practice leadership development activity, the leadership development interface can also link and align leader and leadership development to best impact the unique needs of individuals and the organizations they interact with. In the following sections the 4 quadrants of the leadership development interface model will be explored culminating in how these quadrants can be aligned to achieve better leadership development outcomes.

Quadrant I: Leader Reflection and Discovery

As cited, much of the current thinking on leader development suggests that a leader must be willing to look inside themselves as a person to understand how their view of self and the world around them impacts the way they authentically lead. Leaders must ascertain and challenge their

- fundamental values and beliefs
- personality
- personal well-being (health/spirituality)
- authenticity, character, and qualities
- personal vision/goals

Quadrant I gives place for the exploration of an individual leader's philosophical frame where the "thinking about their thinking" is awakened and accounted for as an integral part of the leadership development interface.

Quadrant II: Leader Multilevel Feedback

As explored previously there is legitimate need for feedback in order for leaders to develop. Feedback forms the base-line and the measurement methodology over time

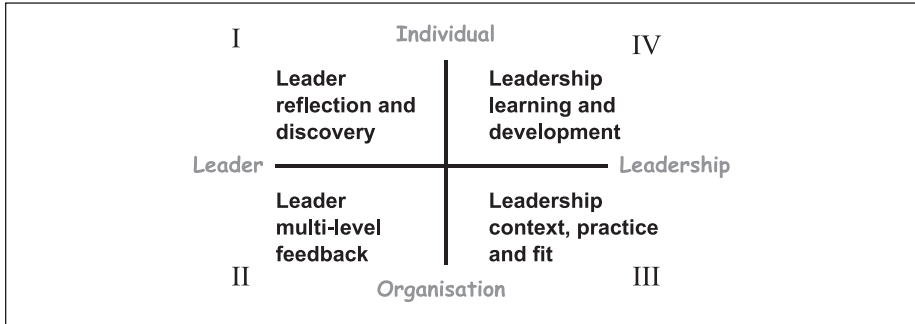


Figure 1. Leadership Development Interface Model

for leaders to ascertain how they are doing and highlights areas for improvement. Feedback needs to be meaningful, personal and specific and provided in various focus areas, modes, and methods including

- formal assessment
- 360 degree feedback
- uncovering multistakeholder perceptions
- measured ability/potential
- coaching

Leaders need to be able to ask for feedback and be willing to hear it, but most importantly it is the organization's role to provide it in constructive and enabling ways. Quadrant II gives place and accountability for feedback and coaching in the leadership development interface.

Quadrant III: Leadership Context, Practice, and Fit

The research suggests leadership development needs a learning place that is real and supported, and a context and purpose that is linked to organizational performance. Organizational settings provide

- performance expectations (reward and consequence)
- learning space (opportunity and resources)
- succession planning
- facilitated development projects and positions (action learning)
- leadership culture—fit/political dynamics

Without context, practice, and fit, leadership development can have hypothetical meaning for individuals. Without it, the development can become general and nonspecific and deemed “great in theory” but not necessarily applicable in a leader's real world

or interest. As well, leaders need exposure to an organization that is willing and able to support learning in action and Quadrant III gives place for this critical aspect of leadership development.

Quadrant IV: Leadership Learning and Development

As discussed, leadership development means building the skills and behaviors that lead to effective leadership learning as an outcome and action. Leadership development requires an interactive basis and can focus on

- competence/skill training (behavioral and technical)
- networks/community/organizational connections
- formal and informal life-long education
- team and hierarchical interactions

Leadership learning and development challenges the individual to identify key leadership social and relational competencies to develop in their leadership to improve interactions with others. Self-directed or externally facilitated, individuals must determine what areas of leadership in action they need to perform better at and then develop these through applied learning strategies to develop those essential leadership competencies. Quadrant IV of the leadership development interface is where interventions and processes around developing leadership can be mapped and captured.

Putting the Interface Together and Why Alignment is Key

The leadership development interface is potentially helpful in sorting and classifying development activities and processes. However, if we treat each part as separate, alignment could be missed. Thus, leaders will spend time on their leadership journey in each of the quadrants from time to time, but may not consider how one intervention links with others, see Figure 2. The current micro perspective on the parts of leader and leadership development rather than the interconnection of the elements of the development process and activities can often exacerbates this reality. The alignment questions and analysis of the holistic frame of the leadership development interface provides an opportunity toward more meaningful, measured, and successful leadership improvement for both individuals and organizations.

To illustrate the need and usefulness of alignment in the leadership development interface, let us introduce two real leadership development case studies that emerged from research cited earlier (Hanson 1999, 2007). These case studies were summarized through participant qualitative interviews from both individual leader and organizational perspectives and revisited over time to ascertain how alignment impacts leadership development activities and perspectives. These case studies are examples of nonalignment in the leadership development interface at the beginning, and the

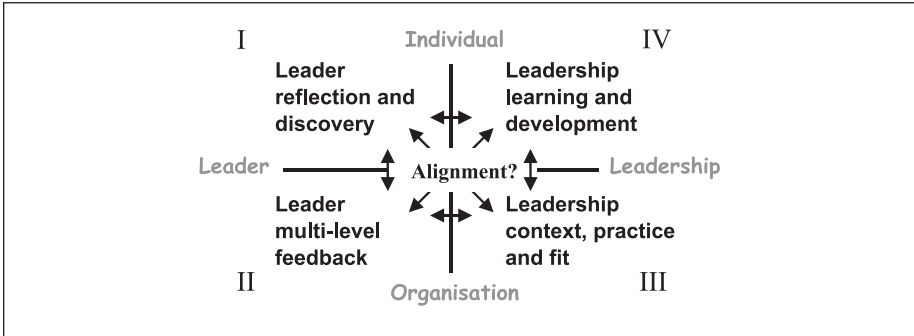


Figure 2. Aligning the leadership development interface

process of finding alignment through interfacing relationships between the leader and their organization toward more connected and meaningful development solutions.

Case Study I: Bob

Bob worked for 10 years in a manufacturing company in quality control. He worked his way up from a technician role to a team leader role and then lab supervisor. Throughout his tenure he was trained on the job and undertook a few introductory management courses. One day, after Bob's annual performance review he made an appointment with the HR Manager to discuss his personal development plan. Bob was armed with a brochure advertising a week long leadership development program run by a reputable consulting company that was linked to one of the area's major universities. The HR Manager asked Bob why he wanted to go on the course, to which Bob replied that he hoped it would help him secure a promotion that he had been seeking for the past year or so. Again the HR Manager asked why the course would help and Bob answered that his boss thought Bob wasn't ready for the promotion and needed more development and suggested the course that he himself had attended a few years earlier. The HR Manager asked Bob if he felt that he needed the course to develop his leadership, to which Bob answered "not really," but it couldn't hurt and that he felt his boss wasn't correct with his assessment and he felt ready for the promotion.

In this case, it is clear that Bob's development solution on offer is in Quadrant IV, a program designed to build his leadership capability. Unfortunately Bob doesn't think he needs the program. This means he is not aligned to its merit and his personal view of his own leadership in Quadrant I. Without alignment between Quadrant I and IV, how much learning can Bob really expect to achieve if he doesn't think he needs to attend? In addition it is clear from the case that there is also alignment missing between Bob's boss and/or the organization providing feedback in Quadrant II and Bob's self-insight in Quadrant I. Bob has received some feedback from his boss but does not accept it and again without alignment here, any leadership development intervention potentially has a high risk of failure.

One of the first key steps in Bob's situation is for the stakeholders to have an alignment conversation rather than a development conversation. This means working with all the stakeholders to understand what needs to occur and why it needs to occur rather than focusing on how to build leadership capability in Bob. In this case, an alignment discussion between Bob, his boss and the HR learning and development manager was arranged. By discussing the areas in the interface where there was not alignment they agreed to the following:

- Put the leadership program on hold given Bob's skepticism about its merit
- Gain more feedback from other stakeholders beyond Bob's boss regarding Bob's leadership to assess his capability.

In the end, a 360 degree assessment was carried out which highlighted that Bob was more prepared for the promotion than his boss thought, but Bob needed some experience in some of the higher level strategic and staffing issues associated with the job. Bob agreed whole heartedly with the feedback. This new insight led to a more aligned development solution. In this case Bob was placed in a temporary role doing his boss's job for 3 months, while his boss carried out a 3 month strategic project for the executive board of the company. This development role was complimented with an executive coaching arrangement for the 3 months. Bob didn't go on the leadership development program that was initially discussed. The alignment process of the leadership development interface led to a much more robust and successful intervention and Bob received a promotion 6 months later.

Case Study 2: Sue

Sue had worked for 5 years in HR for an alcohol beverage company. Within that time frame she had been promoted twice and was placed on the succession plan for the organization as a high potential toward executive level. Sue was provided formal leadership programs and meaningful action learning high profile projects to lead as part of her development, which she had accepted readily and succeeded in. However in the last year it became apparent that something had changed. Sue was becoming reluctant to accept new challenges and even turned down a significant promotion. She was seen by the leadership group as being despondent and not interested in advancement and there was discussion about taking her off the succession plan.

In this case there are also alignment issues in the leadership development interface. Why has Sue become despondent and not accepting the larger leadership roles which is causing the alcohol beverage company to question its plans and development opportunities for her? Without an alignment analysis it is most likely the organization will simply remove her from the succession plan or even put her in more training without regard to how she is seeing her personal leadership. There appears to be alignment issues between her personal leader reflection and discovery in Quadrant I and the leadership context, practice and fit in Quadrant IV, meaning the organization see her fit and opportunity differently than Sue see her personal vision and goals. As in the case above, the stakeholders

involved had an alignment conversation rather than a development conversation to reach next steps. In this case, Sue, her boss, the area director and the HR succession planning manager facilitated a discussion around this alignment issue which uncovered the nature of Sue's changed behavior and attitude toward the organization she worked for. It turned out that a few years earlier, Sue's father had been killed in car accident involving a drunk driver. In coming to terms with this tragedy, she was having a philosophical and ethical issue with working for a company that makes and promotes alcohol consumption. It was clear that her evolving personal values and beliefs were no longer aligned and fit with the context of the organization she worked for. The alignment conversation helped both the organization and Sue to realize that this was not a development issue but a personal self-discovery evolution and new personal reality. As a result of the discussion, Sue decided it was in her best interest to leave the company and the organization supported this decision by helping her make the transition over the next few months. Sue is currently an executive director of HR for a multinational entertainment business.

The above cases illustrate the importance and relevance of alignment to the leadership development interface toward better, supported and measurable development outcomes for leaders and the organizations they work for. It is not enough to provide and engage in leadership development in the four areas individually and it is only through timely and agreed alignment of the quadrant activity that meaningful and more impactful leadership development will occur. Alignment means having learning conversations between leaders and their stakeholders around all of the elements of leader and leadership development and who is accountable for what. It also means seeing leadership development as a shared experience. And finally, alignment means connectivity and the interrelationships of the four elements that make up the leadership development interface.

Implications, Conclusion, and Future Research

The significance and implications of the leadership development interface to key stakeholders involved in leadership development is threefold. First, the model itself provides a tool for individual leaders, their direct managers and HR development specialists to map leadership development activities in organizations. Second, the leadership development interface concept provides an analysis frame from which the key stakeholders can assess balance, accountabilities and emphasis for the collective leadership development activities on offer. Third, the model can provide an evaluation tool for the stakeholders by asking key alignment questions, such as

- Does each leadership development activity or process builds and aligns on other interventions in each quadrant of the interface?
- Does each stakeholder in the process of leadership development agree that there is alignment in the interface from their own unique perspective?
- Are there unknowns for each stakeholder in how each sees the collective leadership development interface and what kinds of conversations need to occur to ensure a common understanding occurs prior to doing any leadership development?

In effect, having a holistic frame to answer the above questions gives the key stakeholders a common link to leadership development activities, accountabilities and alignment. For individual leaders the leadership development interface can help them understand what parts of leadership development they in essence own and need to direct. It also helps individual leaders see the whole picture of how their leadership development needs to connect to the larger organization and directs their interaction with other key stakeholders towards a more whole system view of their personal leadership development. For direct managers of individual leaders, the model can be used as an overarching metacoaching framework to discuss what is meant by leader and leadership development for their direct reports. The tool can guide the conversation toward what is appropriate for leadership development before discussing how to develop their subordinates. The interface can also give clarity to direct managers as to their role in developing leadership in others and ensure there is agreement with their direct report as to a way forward in developing leadership. For HR and development specialists in organization the model can be used as a leadership development audit tool to evaluate what is being done in each quadrant company wide and where there is over emphasis and under emphasis. Also it can help this stakeholder group to provide the leadership development story and philosophy of learning at the organization level. And finally, it can offer HR and development specialists a frame to handle conflicts and misalignment for individual leaders who are either dissatisfied with their own leadership development or confused as to how to develop themselves as leaders.

The leadership development interface model is designed to direct and engage our view of leadership development into the holistic and systemic frame in which it exists for key stakeholders. Micro elements of leadership development have their place in the leadership development landscape but that landscape needs to be succinctly described and referenced to ensure leadership development interventions will achieve their full potential. Without alignment of both the activities and stakeholder mindsets, leadership development effectiveness will continue to be a hit and miss proposition. The conscious awakening of leadership development as a macro interfacing endeavor will help leaders and organizations achieve more meaningful and cost effective leadership development into the future.

Future research into leadership development may need to continue to follow the macro view of the causal relations and holistic context. The leadership development interface model is an attempt to add to this body of research but also to provide a future platform for debate and theory around how leadership development can be framed and aligned towards more effective participation and delivery for all stakeholders. Future research may entail expanding and challenging both the understanding and content of the elements of the leadership development holistic frame presented as well as observing the complex relationship between individuals and the organizational setting in which leadership development in context exists. There may also be an opportunity to explore whether an aligned leadership development interface provides and evaluative tool for more effective and measurable leadership development outcomes. A clear hypothesis would be to say yes to the above notion that alignment equals more effective

leadership development outcomes, but this would need to be tested in further research. These types of focused research in leadership development will continue to help the key stakeholders in building leadership capability and turning context complexity into practical and more effective leadership development solutions.

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Bio

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