
Leader Developmental Readiness

BRUCE J. AVOLIO
Michael G. Foster School of Business

SEAN T. HANNAH
Army Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic

Many of the points raised by McKenna and Davis (2009) parallel the challenges that are faced in executing leader development. Although leader development may be delivered through executive coaching, it is more frequently delivered through on- or off-site training programs, or through the coaching or mentorship of other organizational leaders on the job. Similar to therapy and executive coaching, many leader development interventions ignore the developmental readiness (DR) of participants. In doing so, they are inadvertently retarding the development of those individuals and subtracting from the potential return on investment.

We want to be clear that we are not suggesting that companies are not trying to identify their high potential leaders. However, the type of fine-grain analysis that goes with fully understanding and assessing the DR of leaders for some type of intervention seems to be frequently missing. In an article, which we published recently in *Consulting Psychologist Journal* (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, p. 331), we concluded, “The development of leaders

is a stated goal of most organizations, yet a validated framework and theory for leader development does not yet fully exist, nor is there a method for determining who is developmentally ready to engage in leader development.” Thus, we seek to extend the position taken by McKenna and Davis to the domain of leader development.

DR of Individual Leaders

Components of DR. In their framework for individual and organizational learning, Hannah and Lester (2009) defined DR as “both the ability and motivation to attend to, make meaning of, and appropriate new knowledge into one’s long-term memory structures.” Applied to the context of leadership development, we have drawn from clinical, cognitive, and social psychology; organizational behavior; and leadership; and have defined DR focusing on five factors promoting such motivation and ability.¹

Nature of one’s goals. Prior research has shown that there are systematic differences in how individuals view goals when it comes to tradeoffs between learning

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Bruce J. Avolio.
E-mail: bavolio@u.washington.edu

Address: Michael G. Foster School of Business, University of Washington, Management and Organization Department.

Bruce J. Avolio, Michael G. Foster School of Business, University of Washington, Management and Organization Department; Sean T. Hannah, Army Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic, United States Military Academy, West Point.

-
1. Based on feedback from the reviewers, we have chosen to use more familiar and conversational terms that are not the specific terms used in the research literature to represent the five developmental readiness factors. The terms used in the literature include: (a) learning goal orientation, (b) developmental efficacy, (c) self-awareness, (d) self-complexity, and (e) metacognitive ability.

and performance goals (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals who view themselves as incremental learners tend to interpret task feedback as developmental and are subsequently more oriented toward learning goals. Conversely, leaders that look at themselves as more “fixed” or having less flexibility to develop will tend to view feedback as self- versus task diagnostic. These performance goal-oriented leaders would tend to be less ready to engage in challenging leader development events where failure and negative self-evaluation might occur.

Developmental confidence. The confidence one has to develop in a particular domain has been shown to be more malleable than one’s orientation toward performance versus learning goals (Bandura, 1997). The confidence to develop represents a leader’s judgment regarding whether he or she can develop a specific ability or skill to employ in a certain leadership context. The level of one’s confidence to develop in a specific domain can influence how that individual initially processes information pertinent to his or her development, how that information is interpreted, and how it is used to determine levels of engagement and performance in leader development.

Self-awareness. How clear is the view we have of ourselves? The level of clarity held representing our self-concept has been defined as, “the extent to which self-beliefs (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). We hold that higher levels of clarity will enhance a leader’s ability to make meaning of developmental experiences by aiding the leader to know who they are and how new developmental feedback relates to their self-concept, enabling them to coalesce new information with their self-concept. Although promoting self-reflection, it is important that clarity about oneself be assessed in light of different reflection

techniques. Specifically, whether leaders are adaptive in their reflections; using patterns of thinking and emotions that are open, positive, and learning oriented; or whether they engage in maladaptive reflection (e.g., ruminate over negative aspects; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999) will, in part, affect the leader’s readiness to develop.

Leader self-complexity. Level of self-complexity can also promote or retard leader development. This is because more complex leaders have more internal cognitive and affective associations with which to process and interpret unique and novel experiences (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009). Such leaders can typically process and then refine developmental information more thoroughly as they use more dimensions to discriminate among information concerning how they view who they are, and yet, they can also better determine the commonalities among these dimensions.

Second-order thinking. Finally, leading requires complex cognitive and social problem-solving skills and capacities. These capacities are essential to leaders’ DR in that they assist leaders in fully interpreting their developmental experiences. Leaders who are more developmentally ready demonstrate a form of “second-order” thinking entailing heightened awareness of cognitive strengths, weaknesses, and self-regulation (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). For example, a leader might assess how a developmental challenge is influencing her emotions and how those emotions are influencing decisions, reflect upon the adequacy of the information being used in her thinking, assess what further information is required to improve her judgments; or assess whether adaptive or maladaptive reflection is being used.

Emerging evidence. To date we have tested the effects of three of the above constructs (goal orientation, second-order thinking, and clarity in self-awareness) with respect to assessing a leader’s DR (Hannah &

Avolio, 2007). Over three separate longitudinal leader development programs we have found that each variable offers unique variance in predicting the level of development achieved from Time 1 to Time 2 (6–9 months apart) in both leaders' level of confidence to influence others and in terms of transformational leadership ratings. Future research is underway to investigate the full suite of five DR constructs.

Developing DR. We have focused on these five specific concepts because they (a) are all to a greater or lesser extent malleable, (b) have existing validated measures, and (c) provide a representation of constructs that constitute both *ability* and *motivation* that we suggest are each critical to leader DR. In line with the thinking of McKenna and Davis, we argue that organizations should first *develop the capacity to develop* in their leaders.

By assessing these factors upfront, we would argue, as the present article has suggested, that in a clinical setting we could facilitate the positive development of leaders once the intervention is keyed to the individual's level of readiness. We argue that leaders, in the same way as clients, determine over time their own mental scripts and life stories or narratives for their development. Consequently, by understanding where the script writer is in his or her readiness, we are better able to facilitate the story they create. For example, for a leader with an emphasis on performance goals, how they interpret significant trigger moments at work in terms of facilitating their development may be far less impactful to the overall life script they create versus someone who places a lot of emphasis on learning goals. We suggest this is a critical distinction and may determine whether effective or ineffective leader development occurs.

Organizational DR

At the individual leader level, we are advocating, as was done in the therapeutic context, to focus on defining and assessing

DR. However, although the focal article talks of the importance of “extratherapeutic” forces, we extend that argument to the specific context in which leader development is taking place. Specifically, we must view leadership as being highly contextualized, such as the organization in which it takes place, culture, and so forth. We advocate that the DR of the context will contribute to (or detract from) the positive development we witness in individuals. Specifically, in an organizational context that is less oriented toward promoting leader development, it is likely that new attempts to stretch one's leadership development will be met with indifference or resistance. As resistance grows, it may actually diminish the target learner's DR by reducing developmental confidence. A positively focused climate should provide both sufficient resources and levels of safety for leaders to pursue developmental challenges without reprisals for honest failures. Organizational cultures that promote learning will reinforce making meaning out of failures and how they contribute to development as well as learning from successes.

Just as the quality of the relationship between therapist and client is of utmost importance in therapy so is the relationship between the leader and those who develop him or her. Although therapists must tailor their approach to the client, leader developers must tailor their models, techniques, and modes of delivery of leader development to the individual leader—what the transformational leadership literature (Bass, 1988) has called individualized consideration.

The Model Matters

If casually reading the McKenna and Davis article, one may get the impression that the content of the therapy doesn't matter. Although we do not think they take that extreme of a position, we note that ultimately in leader development, the content is what matters most. Although every therapist may have a “healing myth,” the choice of model regarding the leadership being developed is critical. This is because

leadership is contextualized, and there are knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes (KSAs) that promote effective leadership idiosyncratic to specific leadership contexts, groups, and followers that leaders engage.

Leaders need to build a broad set of skills and capabilities (Lord & Hall, 2005) that promote effective leadership across a span of contexts. If we liken this to marriage counseling, getting a couple to have hope and to want to rebuild a marriage must be accompanied by new relational and social skills, such as interpersonal communications, listening, anger regulation, and so forth. We thus need to be careful not to focus here on mere effect sizes—there needs to be effects with the “right” constructs, those that will facilitate leader and ultimately organizational effectiveness.

Final Thoughts

Most discussions of development tend to speak of individuals being developed as a fairly holistic entity, and McKenna and Davis are no different. We see this assumption applying more to the therapist–client relationship than to leadership development per se. Specifically, leaders’ self-concepts are elaborate and multi-dimensional structures that are differentiated based on how a leader recognizes and interprets various information (e.g., confident or articulate) with respect to how that information pertains to each of the leader’s various roles; such as being a team leader, production manager, and spokesperson (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009). It is therefore critical for leader developers to understand that leaders may have differing levels of DR for each of their social roles and tailor interventions accordingly. In doing so, we believe that the impact of leadership development will not only be enhanced, but we

also expect the return on capital investment in such developmental interventions to be higher as well.

References

- Avolio, B. J., & Hannah, S. T. (2008). Developmental readiness: Accelerating leader development. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Research and Practice*, *60*, 331–347.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bass, B. (1988). *Transformational leadership: Industry, military, and educational impact*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Button, S. B., Mathieu, J. E., & Zajac, D. M. (1996). Goal orientation in organizational research: A conceptual and empirical foundation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *67*, 26–48.
- Campbell, J. D., Trapnell, P. D., Heine, S. J., Katz, I. M., Lavalley, L. F., & Lehman, D. R. (1996). Self-concept clarity: Measurement, personality correlates, and cultural boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 141–156.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, *95*, 256–273.
- Hannah, S. T., & Avolio, B. J. (2007, April). Developmental readiness: A construct to accelerate leader development. In S. T. Hannah (Chair), *Leadership for Critical Response Organizations*. Symposium conducted at the 22nd Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, New York.
- Hannah, S. T., & Lester, P. (2009). A multilevel approach to building and leading learning organizations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*, 34–48.
- Hannah, S. T., Woolfolk, R. L., & Lord, R. G. (2009). Leader self-structure: A framework for positive leadership. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *30*, 269–290.
- Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skills. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *16*, 591–615.
- McKenna, D. D., & Davis, S. L. (2009). Hidden in plain sight: The active ingredients of executive coaching. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *2*, 244–260.
- Metcalfe, J., & Shimamura, A. P. (Eds.). (1994). *Metacognition: Knowing about knowing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Trapnell, P. D., & Campbell, J. D. (1999). Private self-consciousness and the five-factor model of personality: Distinguishing rumination from reflection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*, 284–304.