Developing Leaders through Self-Directed Learning:

A Conceptual Model of Self-Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a greater role for self-development in the process of developing managers and articulates and examines a model of managerial self-development. The problems and issues associated with traditional and formal development programs are highlighted and these are used to draw out the need for a self-directed learning approach for the development of managers. The nature of managerial self-development is then explored and a conceptual model of self-development is outlined and discussed. The model conceptualises self-development in two phases. The first phase relates to actions associated with self-understanding and is driven by self-reflective process and the management of self-awareness reactions. The second phase relates to self-change and incorporates self-regulatory processes.

Keywords: Learning and Development; Individual Development; Leadership Development; Management Development

In recent years, considerable research attention has highlighted the need to develop managers who are able to exhibit cognitive and behavioural complexity in the face of dynamic complex environments (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; Lord & Hall, 2005). One response to the increasing attention to the development needs of managers has been advancement in the nature and extent of formal development activities. Formal training activities, especially those conducted using classroom based education, which have traditionally been associated with management development, have been complemented by a variety of development activities, such as coaching, mentoring, action learning, and use of 360 degree feedback that highlight opportunities for reflection on action (Day, 2001; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2001; Neary, & O'Grady, 2000; Roche, Wick, & Stewart, 2005). An alternate approach is for greater use of informal learning where managers take responsibility for their learning and development and use work experiences as a vehicle for ongoing and continuous development (Daudelin, 1996). This paper outlines the case for a self-development approach for managerial development and presents a conceptual model of self-development to guide managers in the process of self-directed learning.
The Limits of Traditional Formal Management Development

In the last two decades there has been a growing realisation that organisational and national prosperity is linked to continuous development of managerial talent. In parallel, with this increasing attention to management development, there have been growing concerns expressed about the appropriateness of formal management development activities, especially the value of MBA programs (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Many organisations, aware of the criticism of formal management education, have structured their internal development programs to make stronger links between theory and the practice of management (Rappe & Zwick, 2007). Alldredge, Johnson, Stolzfuz & Vicere (2003) for example, describe a typical accelerated leadership development program targeting high-potential managers, that utilises a combination of lectures, action projects, and coaching strategies. Such programs employ action learning strategies (Pedler, 2008), where managers use their work experiences as stimuli for reflective learning and “experiment” with insights about behaviour in order to refine their understanding and skills. This approach highlights the role of reflection on managerial experiences in the process of managerial development.

While these development programs enhance the managerial relevance of the training, they require expensive and extensive effort on behalf of organisations to develop and implement. Consequently, many organisations choose to target these development programs to selected groups of “rising stars” in order to leverage the developmental benefits to those managers seen as occupying future leadership positions. By improving the skills of managers destined for leadership roles in an organisation it is assumed that management within the organisation generally will be improved. However, organisations and their management processes are systems (Baker, 1973; Argyris & Schon, 1974) and a fundamental tenet of systems analysis is that systems improve by correcting the weakest aspects of that system (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972). Thus the targeted use of these sophisticated development approaches may result in only limited impact on the overall managerial culture and operating potential of the organisation’s managers. As Day (2001) argues, development is not only concerned with the skill
enhancement of individual leaders but should also be concerned with “expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes” (582). Ideally, all managers, not just the most talented, need to be stimulated to develop their managerial skills and improve their performance.

An additional problem for formal management development approaches arises from the continuous dynamic environments confronting managers, which requires managers’ development also to be continuous and adjusting to environmental changes and demands. However, formal organisational development programs, especially highly selective and expensive programs, are generally discrete and episodic and often focus on broad managerial competencies. While such programs may provide a stimulus for a concentrated effort to improve skills, the need for continuous updating of skills and knowledge as well as the difficulty of transfer of learning back to workplaces may undermine the value of many formal development programs. As noted by Daudelin (1996), “there is an inherent game of “catch up” in development of MBA programs, executive development programs, manage seminars and workshops, in that “by the time these designers understand existing issues and trends, develop cases, write texts, and create workshop designs, a new wave of business challenges appears” (p.36).

An approach to deal with the concerns listed above is to promote and assist managers to become self-directed learners to take control of their development. From the perspective of self-development managers would seek to continuously assess their own capabilities and identify development needs, initiate their own goals and engage in self-regulation of behaviour in order to establish new behaviours to enhance their managerial performance. In this way, managers self-guide their development activities to continuously evolve and adjust to dynamic situations encountered.

While managers differ in their capacity and willingness to engage in self-development and learn from experiences, organizations are increasingly encouraging managers to be responsible for updating and maintaining the relevance of their skills (Antonacopoulou, 2000). Self-development aligns with this
developing organisational zeitgeist. Furthermore, organisational environments provide substantial opportunities for experiential learning and feedback on performance, two critical factors in self-directed learning.

Given the dynamic environment facing managers and the limitations of formal development processes inside organisations (Bernthal & Wellins 2006), managers’ capacity for continuous learning and adaptability is likely to be a critical self-management skill in the future. Thus it is argued that self-development capacity should be considered part of the required managerial competencies of contemporary managers.

The Nature of Managerial Self-Development (MSD)

MSD focuses on self-directed learning within the organisational environment. In this learning scenario the manager has primary responsibility for the articulation of development needs and the pursuit of corrective action for development of skills and knowledge. MSD is a form of informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001) in that it is learning that is typically outside institutional sponsored and structured learning experiences.

The Managerial Self-Development (MSD) Model

The MSD model, presented in Figure 1, represents an approach to self-directed learning focused on the empowerment of managers to take greater control of their knowledge acquisition and skill development to increase their managerial behaviour repertoire and flexibility, in order to enhance managerial performance. As with formal managerial development programs, the MSD model builds on a framework that seeks to identify competency strengths and deficits to clarify manager’s performance gaps and then focuses attention on efforts to overcome gaps (Spreitzer, 2006). Unlike some approaches such as reflected best-self which stimulates motivation through positive self concepts (Roberts, et al., 2005), MSD focuses on reflection processes stimulated mainly through “perplexity” (Dewey, 1933) about gaps in development.
Given that managerial development implies a change, evolution, or growth from a current level of performance to a capacity for more complex and sophisticated performance, knowledge of one’s performance gap reflect the awareness of the extent and direction of one’s development need. To have knowledge of the ‘performance gap’ requires managers to become aware of their skill strengths and deficits. Self-awareness is generated from feedback from two primary sources about a manager’s performance. These sources relate to feedback from people familiar with the manager’s work, and from the manager’s own experiences. Information from these sources of information can contribute to managers developing accurate and accepted self-awareness of current and required skills. Self-awareness is generated by reflection on the information provided by each of these sources. From the perspective of the MSD model identification of development needs involving self-awareness and self-reflection is associated with the self-understanding phase (see Figure 1).

Self-awareness Phase – Self-Awareness. Self-awareness is often considered little more than a relatively automatic outcome of a cognitive process involving introspective self-reflection and the synthesis of these insights into one’s self-concept. However, many people are very poor at gaining accurate and accepted self-awareness. This may seem surprising given that each of us is privy to our cognitions about the causes of our behaviour, and is observant of all our behaviours. There are the two main problems associated with obtaining accurate and accepted self-awareness. One problem is that perceptions of behaviour are often distorted by biases (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Willard & Gramzow, 2008). We distort our perceptions about ourselves relatively unconsciously when we are faced with judgment or evaluations about our behaviour to protect our self-concept (Kaiser & Kaplan 2006). For example, in performance appraisal situations, we often ignore or rationalise information that confronts our positive self view (Ashford, Blatt, & VanderWalle, 2003). While it can be considered healthy to protect our sense of self, we often have to consider a view of ourselves as less than perfect in order to recognise areas for development.
A second problem confronting accurate and accepted self-awareness of our performance is that we do not often put ourselves in positions of discomfort where limits in our skills and knowledge are exposed (Audia & Locke, 2003; Whetton & Cameron 2007). Putting oneself in a learning situation means that one is performing outside one’s level of performance comfort and we are likely to experience some discomfort in our performance, even risking failure in our performance. To enhance self-awareness, managers need to actively manage their self-awareness reactions to feedback. The first step is being aware of one’s emotional reactions in the feedback process, and recognising rejection or censorship thoughts that arise. A useful strategy is to reframe criticism as poorly delivered but a well-intentioned desire to help or reinterpret problems as opportunities to learn about oneself and acquire new skill (Jackman & Strober 2003). Reframing can also be aided by developing communication scripts to respond to criticism with questions aimed at moving the focus from personal issues to behavioural issues (Whetton & Cameron 2007). Given a capacity to manage self-awareness reactions the quality of our self-awareness will be depended upon the skill in which we engage with self-reflection.

Self-Understanding Phase – Self-reflection. Dewey (1933) who provided the seminal foundation of research on reflection, especially within the field of education (Moon, 2006), considered reflection as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (1933, p.9). For Dewey, reflective thinking is stimulated by the experience of “perplexity” or doubt and uncertainty in dealing with a problem so that reflective thinking seeks to arrive at resolution of the problem through changed understanding. Thus reflection is seen as purposive mental processing of information and experiences leading to new insights and development of cognitive understanding of experiences.

Given the role of reflection to contribute to a capability to act more effectively in the future (Daudelin, 1996; Kolb, 1984), reflection is seen to play a significant role in the learning process. Of particular relevance is experiential learning, which refers to “the organizing and construction of learning from
observations that have been made in some practical situation, with the implication that learning can lead to action” (Moon, 2006, p. 20). Learning in this sense is generally defined as a relatively permanent capacity to act differently as a result of some intervention. Thus in experiential learning, one’s capacity for acting differently is seen to relate to the mental processing of one’s experience. The awareness of, and reflection on, one’s skills and the identification of one’s “performance gap” is, however, not sufficient for engagement and success with self-development efforts. Managers may simply choose to ignore the gap, or dispute and rationalise away the implications (Kaiser & Kaplan, 2006). Other managers may accept the gap and deal with it in ways that do not require self-change, such as working with others that complement skills deficits. Even for managers motivated to act to remedy a development need it is likely that momentum for the change will falter, especially if development relates to changing a deeply ingrained pattern of behaviour (Baumeister, Gaillot, De Wall, & Oaten, 2006, Polivy & Herman 2002). To address these concerns, many organisations provide opportunities to engage in development activities and support managers to nurture the learning process and aid the transference of learning into their long-term behaviour (Spreitzer, 2006). In MSD this support must be built into self-constructed and initiated action plans and their implementation reflects the manager’s skills in self-regulation both of the learning process and the desired behaviour modifications (Nesbit, 2007).

**Self-Change Phase – Self-regulatory Processes.** Self-regulation refers to “processes that enable an individual to guide his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances” (Karoly, 1993, p.25). These processes are engaged when people move outside of their routine behaviour and focus on specific goals such as the acquisition of new knowledge and skills to close performance gaps.

Research on self-regulation has provided rich insights into the dynamics of self-directed change efforts and the nature of interacting processes that underpin agency in self-development. In particular, social
cognitive perspectives conceptualise self-regulation efforts as embedded in systems of reciprocal forces between the person’s thinking, their behaviour, and the environments and situations encountered (Karoly, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). While the social cognitive perspective reflect the “dynamic and reciprocally deterministic” nature of nature of self-regulation (Karoly, Boekaerts & Maes, 2005: 300) it may obfuscate the practicality of insights for those seeking to learn to effectively self-regulate. As Karoly, et. al., (2005) notes, “the road from theory to practice in self-regulation remains poorly illuminated, coarsely formed, and configured with numerous detours that threaten to confuse wary travellers” (p.303). The MSD model seeks to move tentatively along the practice road by providing a conceptual map of the self-development terrain and its relationship to self-regulation.

REFERENCES


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Figure 1: Managerial Self Development Model
Managerial Self-Development Model

**SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

- Needed/Desired Performance
- Gap
- Current Performance
- Self-Awareness
- Self-Reflection
- Others
  - Experience
  - Psych Inventories

**SELF-CHANGE**

- Direction
- Goal Formation
- Energy
- Goal Striving
- Monitoring Evaluation
- Self-Regulatory Process

Managerial Self-Development Model:

- Social and Physical Environment
- Capabilities
- Cognitions
- Affect
- Motives

**Direction**
- Energy
- Goal Formation
- Goal Striving
- Monitoring Evaluation

**Self-Regulatory Process**

**Self-Change**
- Self-Regulatory Process

**Self-Understanding**
- Needed/Desired Performance
- Gap
- Current Performance
- Self-Awareness
- Self-Reflection
- Others
  - Experience
  - Psych Inventories