Leader Identity Self-concordance: Facilitating Positive Leader Development Trajectory

Track: Human Resource Management

Keywords: Leadership development, Leader Identity, Self-Concordance

Leader Identity Self-concordance: Facilitating Positive Leader Development Trajectory

Abstract

To address the need for a more inclusive leader development theory, we extend the existent model by incorporating leader identity self-concordance as an antecedent of a positive leadership trajectory. We propose that, through a mechanism of top-down and bottom-up activation, a high leader identity self-concordance will positively impact on the development of leader self-complexity, leader self-efficacy, and self-awareness, and therefore, enhance the development trajectory of leaders.

Introduction

Today, we are facing a number of complex and changing challenges at a global level. Institutions, governments, and organizations are in the constant search and training of leaders that can guide them in this uncertain environment. This is resulting in the investment of an enormous quantity of resources into developing leaders (Allen & Hartman, 2008; DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Consequently, research into leadership has grown exponentially over the last two decades resulting in a wide range of theories that have significantly improved our understanding of leadership processes (Dinh et al., 2014). One field in which the literature has expanded considerably is leader development. Despite arguments supporting dispositional components making first-rate leaders, most of the attributes studied in this area are state-like and thus receptive to change from appropriate development processes and triggering events (Day et al., 2009; Hannah et al., 2009a; Lord & Hall, 2005).

We will understand leader development as the processes involved in the progression of an individual's knowledge, skills and abilities as well as the self-concept associated with their competence as a leader (Day et al., 2009). Individuals develop their self-concept and subsequent leader competencies at different rates and undergo a unique development growth trajectory; thus it is expected that individual leader development paths will vary both between individuals and over time within each (Day & Sin, 2011; Hannah et al., 2009a). Indeed, people engaging in a leader development program are not expected to start at the same level; nevertheless, it is in everyone's best interest that they can make the most of the training experience.

Consequently, various models have been proposed that focus on the characteristics and factors that can help an individual to be developmentally ready to initiate and make the most of a training experience (Bruce J Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Hannah et al., 2009a). Bruce J Avolio and Hannah (2008) propose a five-factor indicator of developmental readiness: learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy, self-awareness, leader complexity and meta-cognitive ability. Hannah and colleagues (2009a) elaborate on the leader's self-construct, which they conceptualize as "the number of underlying dimensions in one's self-representation" (p. 271). They argue that an elaborate

and definite leader self-construct allows situational cues to prime relevant aspects of the self that in turn activate a cognitive-affective processing system that leads to leader behaviors. They also argue that leader behaviors initiated from the leaders' self-construct – i.e. leader self-concordant behaviors – will prompt positive reactions from followers which will further enrich the self-concept of the leader and followers (Hannah et al., 2009a). They suggest that over time, a leader's self-concept will become more complex and provide the leader with more personal resources to draw from when experiencing developmental triggering events (Bruce J Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Hannah et al., 2009a).

While the model proposed by Hannah and colleagues (2009a) is very effective in explaining the cycle that could lead to a positive leader development trajectory, it relies on the presence of a well-built leader self-construct to begin this virtuous spiraling cycle of development. Supporting this perspective, Lord and Hall (2005) argue that leadership skills develop from proactive efforts to seek out leadership experiences. To find these experiences and indeed benefit from them, the individual has to at least see him or herself as a potential leader (Hannah et al., 2009a). However, just viewing oneself as a leader will not do the trick. Both, identity development as well as self-regulation research recognize that holding an identity does not necessarily mean that enacted behaviors will be in line with such identity (Adriasola, Steele, Day, & Unsworth, 2011; Adriasola, Unsworth, & Day, 2012; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Day et al., 2009; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). From the identity literature, we know that identity development is a spiraling process rather than a linear one. In it, the interaction between the individual's commitments and information from the environment will lead to a cycle of conflict and resolution in search of balance (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Day et al., 2009). From a self-regulatory perspective, we know that conflict occurs between behaviors and higher order goals (i.e. identities) leading to a decrease in effort and well-being (Adriasola et al., 2012; Bono & Judge, 2003; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to understand the factors that can enhance the development trajectory of leaders. Therefore, we build upon previous research on leader development trajectories by proposing leader identity self-concordance as an antecedent to a positive leader development trajectory.

Leader Identity Self-Concordance & the Goal Hierarchy

Sheldon and Elliot (1999) define self-concordance as the extent to which goals pursued by the individual are in line with the interests and values of the self. In order to precise this definition, Adriasola and her colleagues (2012) proposed a conceptualization of self-concordance through the goal hierarchy, which allows representing the way in which an individual will make meaning of the different goals he/she holds in their goal hierarchy. Rather than focusing on the self-concordance of the behavior or task goal, here we look at the level of self-concordance of the leader identity in order to understand the extent to which the individual's identity is connected or not with the remaining goals pursued by the individual. Therefore,

we will conceptualize leader identity self-concordance as the number and strength of connections linking leader identities held by the individual with other goals within the goal hierarchy.

Research on self-concordance has associated self-concordant goals with multiple positive outcomes such as sustained effort, goal attainment and job and life satisfaction, among others (Bono & Judge, 2003; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon et al., 2004). Self-concordance has also been attributed to authentic leaders, which would have self-concordant identities (Gardner, 2005). However, a direct link between self-concordance and a positive trajectory of leader development has not been established in the existent model of leader development.

Leader Development at an individual level

Day and Dragoni (2015, p.134) propose a theoretical model of proximal and distal indicators of leader development. They define leader development as "the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes". They propose that, through experience, individuals can enhance their initial predisposed levels of leadership capabilities, by developing leader self-efficacy, self-awareness, and leader self-complexity in the short-term and individual outcomes in the short-term such as dynamic skills and abstractions and meaning making abstractions and processes.

This model is very useful for explaining the developmental outcomes that rise as the leader advances in his trajectory, the mechanism leaders use to develop those outcomes in not completely explain it. More specifically, the differences in the leverage leaders take from developmental experiences and how they can achieve different levels of proximal outcomes needs to be clarified. Therefore, we will build our set of propositions around how leader identity self-concordance can have an effect on the proximal outcomes of this framework (Figure 1).
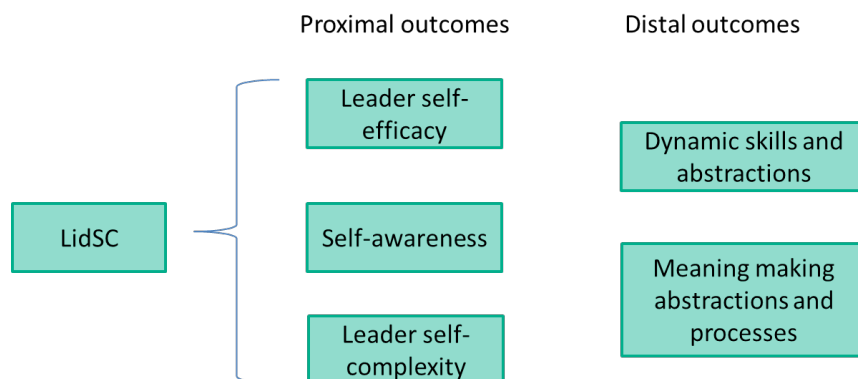

Figure 1 Leader development processes and outcomes

Leader Identity Self-Concordance and positive leader development trajectories

A self-concordant leader identity, represented by the high number and strength of connections between the leader identity and other goals pursued by the individual, will facilitate priming at any level of the goal hierarchy. In other words, through top-down or bottom-up activation mechanisms within the goal hierarchy (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Lord et al., 2010), priming of goals at any level (i.e. project goals, task or identities) would activate the remaining relevant goal structure. Through this mechanism of priming and top down and bottom up activation, leader identity self-concordance will impact in the three proximal outcomes named earlier: leader self-complexity, self-awareness, and leader self-efficacy.

Leader self-complexity. Through the priming mechanism, even if the leader self-concept lacks the complexity to provide an individual with the tools to derive meaning from the developmental experience (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Hannah et al., 2009b), other goals at different levels (such as project goals, or even task goals) can help fill in for the missing complexity to be developed. The richness of the high leader identity self-concordance is the connectedness of its structure within their goal hierarchy. This type of structure will allow priming of a regular task to have a scaffolding effect indirectly linking different aspects of the self to the leader identity. In other words, priming of tasks that are connected to both, leader identity as well as other identities held by the individual will eventually help him to associate those other parts of the self as complementary or supplementary to their leader identity.

Proposition 1. Leader Identity self-concordance will positively relate to a developing leader self-complexity.

Self-efficacy. The priming mechanism will give a self-concordant individual the capacity to make meaning of task and other goals not directly related to leadership and establish a connection between them. The individual will increase the spectrum of behaviors and KSA perceived to be part of his leader's role, developing a more inclusive implicit leadership theory (ILT) against which the individual compares their performance as a leader. By comparing himself to a more inclusive ILT, leaders will increase successful behaviors or achieved goals related to their leader identity. On the other hand, the daily complexity of work demands is part of the individual's goal hierarchy (Adriasola et al., 2012; Bono & Judge, 2003; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998; Cropanzano et al., 1993). A high leader self-concordance will imply high connections to goals and tasks and indirectly to other roles that represent the complexity of work demands. Thus, leader identity self-concordance will increase the relationship between developmental challenges and work demands and also increase the feasibility in successfully managing this challenges.

Proposition 2. Leader Identity self-concordance will positively relate to an increased self-efficacy.

Self-awareness. Garner et al. (2005, p.349) define self-awareness as "a process whereby one comes to reflect on one's unique values, identity, emotion, goals, knowledge, talents and/or capabilities, often triggered by external events". The development of connections between goals at different levels that are not directly linked requires a conscious process. The individual will need awareness of his goals and exercise an intentional meaning making to establish connections. This process of thinking about his goals is related to the individual's metacognitive capacity. The priming mechanism will act as a platform to develop self-awareness and metacognitive thinking. In this situation, activated goal structures will help the individual make meaning of developmental experience and thus be motivated to engage in the spirals of leader development growth actively. By contrast, a leader identity that is not self-concordant is represented by few, weak or even conflicting connections with other goals. Thus, priming any goal that conflicts or is disconnected with the leader identity will make the dispute noticeable or will just miss the opportunity to activate the desired priming. As a consequence, there is a high chance that the developmental experience could go unnoticed by the individual and thus would not lead to a positive leader development trajectory (Day & Sin, 2011).

Proposition 3. Leader identity self-concordance will positively relate to a growing leader self-awareness.

Conclusions and Further research

Through the incorporation of the leader identity self-concordance as an antecedent of a positive leader development trajectory, we have advanced in the necessity of a more comprehensive leader development theory. On the one hand, we expect that a high level of leader identity self-concordance will predispose an individual to a more positive trajectory. But, on the other hand, our three propositions point out that the leader identity self-concordance can also become a developmental tool for the ongoing development of the leader.

Our next step will be to test our propositions by creating an intervention where we help individuals to increase their level of leader identity self-concordance. We will force them to establish connections within their goal hierarchy, increasing the individual´s ongoing level of leader identity self-concordance. Consequently, we will measure the impact of this interventions in their level of leader self-complexity, leader self-efficacy, and leader self-awareness.

References

Adriasola, E., Steele, A. R., Day, D. V., & Unsworth, K. (2011). *Leader Identity: Using goal hierarchy self-concordance to understand leader emergence.* Paper presented at the 26th Annual SIOP Conference, Chicago.

Adriasola, E., Unsworth, K., & Day, D. (2012). *Goal Self-Concordance: Understanding Its Effects through a New Conceptualisation and Task Differentiation*. Paper presented at the Academy of Management, Boston.

Allen, S. J., & Hartman, N. S. (2008). *Leadership development: An exploration of sources of learning.* SAM Advanced Management Journal, 73(1), 10.

Austin, J. T., & Vancouver, J. B. (1996). Goal Constructs in Psychology: Structure, Process, and Content. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120(3), 338-375. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6WY5-46SGJSY-2/2/82aa9473ee8e40f9cbe8de85e7a67d55

Avolio, B. J., & Hannah, S. T. (2008). Developmental readiness: Accelerating leader development. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 60(4), 331.

Bono, J. E., & Judge, T. A. (2003). Self-concordance at work: toward understanding the motivational effects of transformational leaders. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46(5), 554-571.

Bosma, H. A., & Kunnen, E. S. (2001). Determinants and mechanisms in ego identity development: A review and synthesis. *Developmental review*, 21(1), 39-66.

Cropanzano, Russell, Keith James, and Maryalice Citera. "A goal hierarchy model of personality, motivation, and leadership." *Research in organizational behavior* 15 (1993): 267-267.

Day, D. V., & Dragoni, L. (2015). Leadership development: An outcome-oriented review based on time and levels of analyses. *Annu. Rev. Organ. Psychol. Organ. Behav.*, 2(1), 133-156.

Day, D. V., Harrison, M. M., & Halpin, S. M. (2009). *An integrative approach to leader development: Connecting adult development, identity, and expertise*. New York: Routledge.

Day, D. V., & Sin, H.-P. (2011). Longitudinal tests of an integrative model of leader development: Charting and understanding developmental trajectories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(3), 545-560. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.04.011

DeRue, D. S., & Wellman, N. (2009). Developing leaders via experience: the role of developmental challenge, learning orientation, and feedback availability. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(4), 859.

Dinh, J. E., Lord, R. G., Gardner, W. L., Meuser, J. D., Liden, R. C., & Hu, J. (2014). Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 36-62.

doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.005

Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005). "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 343-372.

Hannah, S. T., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., & Harms, P. D. (2008). Leadership efficacy: Review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6), 669-692. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.09.007

Hannah, S. T., Woolfolk, R. L., & Lord, R. G. (2009a). Leader self-structure: a framework for positive leadership. *Journal of organizational behavior*, 30(2), 269-290.

Hannah, S. T., Uhl-Bien, M., Avolio, B. J., & Cavarretta, F. L. (2009b). A framework for examining leadership in extreme contexts. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*(6), 897-919.

Judge, T. A., Bono, J. E., Erez, A., & Locke, E. A. (2005). Core Self-Evaluations and Job and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Self-Concordance and Goal Attainment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(2), 257-268. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.90.2.257

Lord, R. G., Diefendorff, J. M., Schmidt, A. C., & Hall, R. J. (2010). Self-Regulation at Work. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61(1). doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100314

Lord, R. G., Hannah, S. T., & Jennings, P. L. (2011). A framework for understanding leadership and individual requisite complexity. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 1(2), 104-127.

Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skill. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591-615. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6W5N-4GTVYMR-1/2/d7a6d764bcb3886f970e3e8021c4652c

Sheldon, K. M., & Elliot, A. J. (1998). Not all personal goals are personal: Comparing autonomous and controlled reasons for goals as predictors of effort and attainment. *Personality Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 546.

Sheldon, K. M., & Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal wellbeing: The self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(3), 482-497.

Sheldon, K. M., Elliot, A. J., Ryan, R. M., Chirkov, V., Kim, Y., Wu, C., Sun, Z. (2004). Selfconcordance and subjective well-being in four cultures. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, 35(2), 209-223. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6X01-46R0VJC-1G/2/6a2f006a02adeea0dff004ddf055e7fe

Sheldon, K. M., & Kasser, T. (1998). Pursuing personal goals: Skills enable progress but not all progress is beneficial. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24, 1319-1331. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6X01-46R0VJC-1G/2/6a2f006a02adeea0dff004ddf055e7fe