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Going Beyond Contemporary Leader Development Practices: Assessing Leader Readiness Using Cognitive Stage Development and Experiential Learning Theories

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

During the many years that we have been doing leader development work, we have looked for ways to assess readiness of aspiring leaders to assume leadership positions. Choosing leaders without carefully assessing their readiness can lead to significant financial and emotional costs for both the individuals and the organization.

Consider the employee who is highly engaged and self-directed in her work, manages ambiguity well, genuinely engages in the journey of becoming an agent of change, seeks ways to understand herself as a leader, and relishes the possibilities of ideas. On the other hand, there is the employee who looks to others for direction and answers, finds the lack of clarity and ambiguity unbearable, resists new ideas, has difficulty making decisions, or jumps right into the decision-making process without careful reflection. These disparate behaviors in employees seem to occur unrelated to age, gender, and socioeconomic level. As teachers, managers, and consultants, we have engaged in our own leader development practices and observed those of others in an attempt to explain these differences.

The ability of human resources professionals and managers to determine leader potential by assessing specific behaviors and traits can help them make effective choices. If employees assume leadership positions before they are ready, the result can lead to stress, anxiety and even failure. For this reason, we believe employees should be chosen for leadership positions based on sound theoretical models.

The literature is rich in leader development and attribution models describing a myriad of important skills, traits and styles associated with effective leadership; among them are emotional and social intelligence, self-management, the ability to catalyze commitment and influence others to pursue a clear and compelling vision, and the capacity for and interest in life-long learning (Argyris, 1976; Bennis, 1989; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1989; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002; Heifetz, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Avolio, 1999, 2005).

Others (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009) have focused on how leader development evolves over one's lifespan. Employees may develop skills and traits needed to be effective leaders in specific situations as they advance through their lives, but not develop the skills needed for others. For example, an employee leading a task force may demonstrate excellent leadership skills in a small group project setting, but not be ready to assume a longer-term managerial role. Skills required to lead a small project group may be predictive of leader potential in a small group setting, yet according to adult development theory new developmental milestones would need to occur because effective leadership in management requires the higher order and specific skills noted earlier (Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996; Lord & Hall 2005). To that end, assessing skills, traits and styles for readiness to assume leadership roles calls for identification of those needed for a specific leadership situation and the means to assess them.

Despite the plethora of leader development literature, there is a paucity of literature addressing leader readiness. The current literature focuses on the use of training, coaching and mentoring as chief modalities for promoting leader development. Our inability to systematically assess when development is sufficient and employees are ready to assume leadership positions led us to explore the use of both Perry's cognitive stage development and Kolb's experiential learning theories, which provide complementary frameworks for observing and assessing leader readiness.

Cognitive Stage Development Theory

We have found Perry's (1999) seminal theory to be highly useful in our work, because of its focus on adult stage development. Cognitive stage development theory posits that people advance through stages of cognitive development sequentially, developmentally and predictably. Depending on the potential leaders' levels of cognitive development, there are qualitative differences in the way they approach and make sense of their world. To that end, those assessing the readiness of potential leaders should take an employee's level of cognitive stage development into account.

William Perry, who studied the cognitive development of college students at Harvard in the 1950's and 1960's, found that students go through four stages (with nine overlapping positions), of intellectual and ethical development, initially seeing knowledge as simplistic and dualistic, and progressing to a level where their view of the world and themselves is highly complex and contextual, and where they see knowledge as actively constructed by themselves based on their existing cognitive structures. He called these stages Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism and Commitment (Perry, 1999) as illustrated in Figure 1.

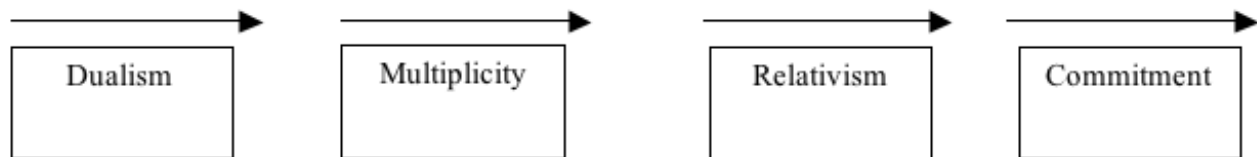


Figure 1.

Although one might justifiably question the generalizability of Perry's model to the work we do with adults of both genders, researchers such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) studied women with a wide range of ages and socioeconomic levels and found similar developmental stages.

Use of Perry's Theory in Assessing Leadership Readiness

In the Dualism Stage employees see the world in "right and wrong" terms. Initially, they believe there is only one "right" way that is determined by an authority figure, such as a manager, who they rely on to make decisions for them. Typically at this stage, they do not believe that they have the authority to make significant decisions within their purview. Later in this stage, they see those in "authority" make mistakes and begin to believe that there can be right and wrong decisions, which continues to cause them anxiety in their decision-making. In our prior roles as managers and consultants, we saw very few in leadership positions in this stage due to their inability to make decisions or demonstrate personal agency.

Those in the Multiplicity Stage are more cognitively complex. Realizing the possibility of making right

and wrong decisions, potential leaders rely on their managers for help in using an appropriate decision-making process. They understand that making good decisions is quite complex and can lead to error. While they have seen many leaders succeed, they have also seen others fail and this creates anxiety for them. They have confidence that an effective decision can be made using the right process. They also begin to examine their own identity. Thus, for them, decision making is a process involving both external authorities and knowledge of self.

The Relativism Stage is characterized by a move from an external to an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and the experience of personal empowerment. Managers are no longer sought to provide the right decision, but rather serve as resources. Potential leaders use an objective and analytical process in making a decision for which they take responsibility. Knefelkamp and Sleptiza (1976) describe this as a reflective stage where people consider the consequences of making a decision and confront the responsibility that goes with doing so.

In the Commitment Stage, potential leaders are ready to assume leadership roles and responsibilities. They take greater responsibility for their decision making process, analyzing and synthesizing complex information based on their values, and begin to integrate their decisions as part of their self-identity. They examine the consequences, both pleasant and unpleasant, of their decisions and actions. Potential leaders in this position have clear knowledge of who they are. They reach out to the outer world, seeking out challenges in order to widen their knowledge and learn new things in an effort to attain their full potential.

Employees in the first two stages are unlikely to possess the cognitive capacity needed to assume leadership roles. They demonstrate high degrees of followership, relying heavily on external sources of authority to make decisions and guide their work. As they move into the third and fourth stages of development, their cognitive capacity develops as they increase their ability to make significant decisions; to solve complex problems; to manage themselves; to tolerate ambiguity; and to demonstrate self-awareness, integrity, and commitment to high ideals and life-long decisions. Although leader development is an ongoing process that can occur in each stage, it is at this final stage where leadership readiness occurs and potential leaders engage in what Schön (1983) refers to as reflective practice. Thus, we believe that assessing potential leaders' stages of cognitive development would allow managers to make informed decisions about their readiness to assume leadership roles.

Experiential Learning Theory

As discussed above, experience plays a pivotal role in developing cognitive capacity (Perry, 1999). It provides potential leaders opportunities for learning that involve relatively permanent increases or changes in the behaviors, knowledge, and skills needed to expand their abilities. In our work with potential leaders we have seen significant differences in how they learn from these experiences.

Perry (1999), Piaget (1969), Freire (1970), Dewey (1958) and Lewin (1951) stressed that the heart of all learning lies in the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflection of experience. To that end, we have found experiential learning theory, as developed by David Kolb, complementary to cognitive stage development in informing our understanding of leadership readiness. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory is consistent with Perry's model of how people learn, grow and develop; both believe the ability to learn from experience is a highly important life long skill. One can extrapolate from experiential learning theory that readiness to assume leadership involves a holistic process of

adaptation to the world “whereby knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, p. 41).

Kolb developed a model to explain how experience informs learning. This model depicts a process of experiential learning that involves two dialectical modes for grasping experience (Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AE)), and two dialectical modes for transforming experience (Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE)). Experiential learning theory posits that there is a continuous interaction of four distinctive learning modes for processing experience, as depicted in Figure 2. Present tangible experiences are the basis for thoughtful reflections; in turn, these are assimilated into essential meaning as expressed in abstracted concepts. From this derived meaning new implications for action can be drawn and intentionally experimented with in the shaping of new experiences. Holistic learning thus proceeds as a result of the utilization of the four adaptive modes.

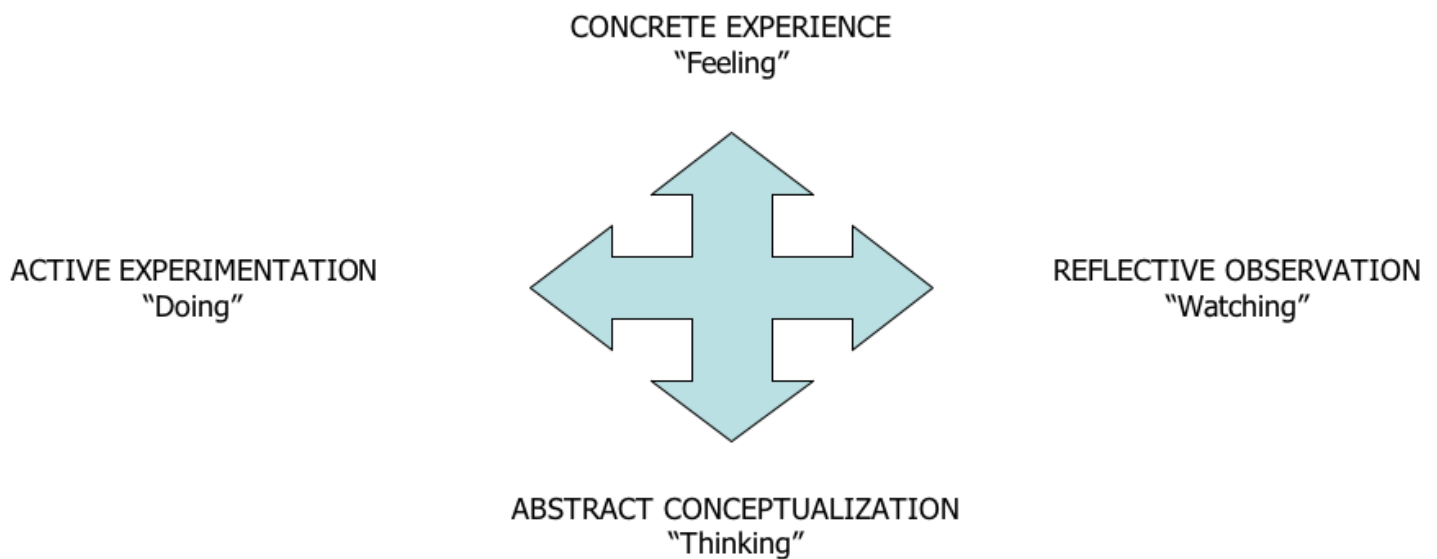


Figure 2.

To be effective, aspiring leaders require all four different abilities depicted in the experiential learning model. Effective leaders choose the appropriate learning abilities needed depending upon the specific situation. Concrete Experience is the mode in which experiences are grasped through reliance on the tangible, felt sensing qualities of immediate experience, such as that coming from facilitating a meeting or giving an employee feedback. Others acquire new information through Abstract Conceptualization, relying on conceptual understanding, symbolic representation, and analysis of ideas such as analyzing organizational data for a strategic plan and synthesizing data from a cultural climate audit.

In transforming experience, people reflect on their actions and carefully watch others in the process. This is Reflective Observation. Leaders asking for feedback about their performance or clarifying their goals and priorities at work are examples of this reflective mode. Others choose Active Experimentation, where they are action-oriented and initiate or involve themselves in activities, such as scheduling meetings for finding a solution to an organizational issue or providing performance feedback to an employee. While each of these dimensions is an independent mode of grasping and

transforming experience, in combination their emphasis on continuous learning can produce the highest level of cognitive stage development needed for adaptation to leadership roles.

Kolb (1976, 1984) theorized that while every individual utilizes each mode to some extent, he/she has a preferred mode of learning resulting from the tendency to learn through either Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualization, Reflective Observation, or Active Experimentation. Truly effective leaders are able to rely flexibly on the four learning modes in whatever combination the situation requires of them; having developed skills in each area, they can call on any one of them as needed.

We believe that experiential learning theory works well in conjunction with cognitive stage development theory and concur with William Perry's (1999) belief that multiple theories are needed to explain the complexity of human learning and meaning making. Indeed, Kolb (1984) himself felt that experiential learning theory complements Perry's, as well as Piaget's, Kohlberg's, and Loevenger's theories of cognitive stage development, taking their theories, which are based on linear and sequential development, and integrating the experiential learning process as a means of understanding cognitive growth and development. Thus, one of the major shortcomings of cognitive stage development is that it does not explain the process of moving from one stage to the next. While Perry describes development as moving from stages of "Dualism" to "Commitment," Kolb's experiential learning theory frames the developmental process by how one moves to increasingly complex stages.

Kolb describes learning as a dynamic process, allowing for a more holistic way of understanding and working with individuals as they move through their stages of development. Kolb's model is not an alternative to Perry's, but rather a complementary framework that addresses cognition, experience, perception, and behavior, thereby embellishing our understanding of leadership readiness; used together, they provide a more powerful and useful guide to the understanding of individual growth and development towards leadership readiness than can either alone. While Perry's theory moves us through increasingly complex stages of intellectual development, Kolb's theory provides a way of understanding the deeper learning necessary to prepare one to enter subsequent stages of cognitive development (see figure 3). In this way the effective leader incorporates earlier learning from experience into a new, higher level of cognitive functioning, much the way we might envision a helix.

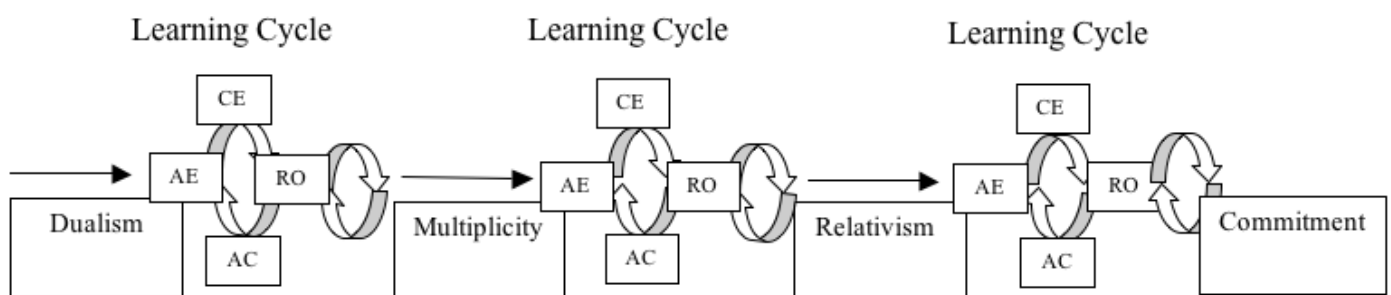


Figure 3.

Use of Kolb's Theory in Assessing Leadership Readiness

Since effective leadership depends upon the integration of all four modes of learning, holistic learning may be blocked when one or more of the learning abilities associated with each mode is

underdeveloped or overlooked. Since leader development entails an ongoing learning process, the inability to use all of these modes may well impede an aspiring leader's ability to achieve goals and assume a leadership role. Over utilization of a preferred mode, or under development of another, can lead to incomplete learning in preparing for a leadership role. Human resources professionals and managers who understand aspiring leaders' experiential learning preferences can capitalize on them, while encouraging the strengthening of underdeveloped modes of learning.

To illustrate, when Reflective Observation predominates over Abstract Conceptualization, aspiring leaders may enjoy gathering a considerable amount of information, but find it challenging to analyze it and to make a decision. Failing to synthesize information, they may make the same mistake twice or even more often. Those who are strongest in Abstract Conceptualization may find it rewarding to assimilate disparate facts gathered into a solid plan for action, and yet have difficulty carrying through with their good intentions because they fear taking risks. Another pitfall of relying on the Abstract Conceptualization mode is that one may embark on a project without regard to how well it fits the organization's values and needs. Other managers may find it exciting to immerse themselves in an experience, but have difficulty reflecting upon its meaning and significance. For example, one aspiring leader might rush into an opportunity to act on a decision without gaining adequate information or reflecting upon the value and significance of that information. When Reflective Observation predominates at the expense of other modes for learning from experience, managers may have a flood of ideas, but be unable to develop a plan of action.

One of the challenges that human resource professionals and managers often face occurs when aspiring leaders lack the skills and abilities needed to be effective leaders and fail to see these deficiencies. Consider those who fail to recognize their need for a high degree of direction, but who simultaneously aspire towards leadership positions. In these and similar situations, a human resource professional's or manager's intervention could guide them to greater integration of experience by encouraging reflection, thus aiding their development toward a higher level of cognitive functioning for assuming a leadership role. Guidance and feedback from a manager may counter an imbalance between observation and action, either from a tendency by an individual to emphasize decision and action at the expense of information gathering, or from a tendency to become bogged down by data collection and analysis at the expense of risk taking. Ultimately, a holistic learning process seeks to counter ineffective tendencies by promoting higher-order purposeful action.

Information about aspiring leaders' preferred modes of learning can inform human resources professionals and managers in designing an individualized leadership readiness strategy using methodology that enhances learning and facilitates growth in cognitive development. For example, those whose strengths are in Concrete Experience will have a preference for learning through job shadowing and hands-on-experience, feedback and discussion, and coaching. Alternatively, those whose learning strengths are Active Experimentation will learn best by conducting their own research about what constitutes effective leadership and the skills and traits needed; they will welcome guidance by human resources professionals or managers who have knowledge about organizational opportunities and ask thought provoking questions.

Even when one successfully integrates all four modes of learning, an aspiring leader in the early stages of cognitive development will not eagerly pursue a higher order activity, such as making important decisions, until he or she has developed the sense of personal agency found in later stages. Thus, in

assessing an aspiring leader's potential, it is important to assess his/her ability to integrate all four learning styles, as well as his/her stage of cognitive development.

Conclusion

As we learn more about cognitive stage development and experiential learning theory, it becomes increasingly apparent to us that aspiring leaders often enter into leadership roles without management's appreciation and understanding of the formers' learning strengths, weaknesses and styles. Perry's cognitive stage development and Kolb's experiential learning theories, when used together, provide complementary theoretical frameworks that can assist human resources professionals and managers in assessing aspiring leaders' readiness to assume leadership roles. Thus, experiential learning and cognitive stage development theories provide additional lenses through which we may understand aspiring leaders' readiness to assume leadership roles.

Conducting research using the Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb, 2005) and the Learning Environment Preferences (LEP) (Moore, 1987) would provide empirical data about the usefulness of these theories in practice. In the absence of such data, we can only speculate that using these theories in human resources practices would not only maximize the likelihood of successful outcomes, but perhaps as importantly also engage aspiring leaders in a learning experience that promotes a higher level of cognitive functioning, while providing a systematic way to assess leadership readiness.

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