Revisiting leadership development – The Participant Perspective

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Final

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address limitations of prevailing approaches to leadership development programmes and make suggestions how these might be overcome. These limitations are an outcome of the dominant rational functional approach to leadership development programmes. Based on empirical research, and underpinned by organisational theory, the paper suggests a shift towards a socio-constructivist perspective on design and implementation of leadership development programmes. The explorative study proposes that context and participant differences need to be recognised as factors impacting on the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a review of relevant literature and qualitative data collected using the case study method. The study presented is an explorative study.

Findings – The paper finds that participant interaction with leadership development programmes varies depending on individual and/or contextual factors. Current design logic neither recognises nor utilises such situatedness as programmes develop their linear and unidirectional logic. Designers of programmes underestimate the extent to which programme participants create a context-specific understanding of leadership learning as they interact with the programme. Their personal and organisational context shapes this interaction. A socio-constructivist perspective can provide theoretical foundation for the argument that leadership development programmes can become more effective if context-specific dimensions are recognised as shaping and constraining factors impacting on programme participants.

Originality/value – The paper argues that it is time to move away from offering leadership development programmes which emphasise input over interaction. The paper encourages commissioners and designers of leadership programmes to recognise that an overly didactic approach may limit the effectiveness of such programmes.

Key words: leadership development programme; sensemaking

Introduction

The need to develop leadership capability and capacity is widely recognised by public and private sector organisations throughout the world. Corporations continue to make significant investments in leadership development programmes (LDPs), and public sector agencies in the industrialised world, have not lagged behind. To deliver on demanding shareholder and stakeholder expectations, to respond to the ever growing dynamics of changing markets, or pressures of government agendas, effective leadership

is required, and innovation, change and transformation are seen as central tasks of leadership in both private and public sectors, and at all levels (Cabinet Office, 2001; Foster et al., 2008). Since the late 1990s investment in leadership development has been ever increasing, and there is now an abundance of literature reporting on leadership development programmes (LDPs), activities and initiatives in both private and public sectors (Cabinet Office, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2004; Audit Scotland, 2005; Boaden 2006).

Despite such efforts, LDPs are regarded as being "in their infancy" (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001: 387), and LDP research is still emerging, and undertheorised (Edmonstone and Western, 2002). Evidence of their impact on organisational performance, in public and private sector organisations alike, seems at best inconclusive, at worst negligible (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001; Mole, 2004; Cheng and Hampson, 2008).

Prevailing leadership development research and practice, similar to the wider organisational development discourse (Gherardi et al., 1998; Elkjaer, 2001; Örtenblad, 2002), have institutionalised a notion of leadership and leadership development which focuses on the participant as a recipient of didactic input and pre-set pedagogy. This occurs even where a shift from conventional teaching to more interactive and practice-based learning approaches and a shift from essentialist to contingent and transformational leadership qualities are promoted (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2004). These approaches expect participants to learn and transfer back into their organisation (Tyler, 2004) what has been learned (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2004). Success of a leadership development programme is then a matter of mechanics: barriers to transfer can either be overcome or they cannot.

Thus, despite rich evidence of innovative pedagogy in LDP practice, current thinking about LDP design and implementation remains rooted in an overly techno-rational and functional perspective (Edmonstone and Western, 2002). This leaves decisions as to what ought to be learned, and how and when, in the hands of senior LDP commissioners and designers, and which assumes an overly linear and causal relation between pedagogic input and output, learning and application. Little attention is paid to the question whether, and in what way, individual and contextual differences between participants, such as their respective organisational roles, career stages or organisational cultures, might enhance or inhibit their engagement with the programme and their learning. To further our understanding of these dynamics, we propose that a shift from a functional to a socio-constructivist perspective on LDPs might be useful if we are to capture how programme participants construct and make sense of their learning experience and how this might be transferred back to the organisation as learning.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to such a shift in perspective. The explorative study presents data collected from an ongoing case study of a LDP, offered in the Scottish public sector. While this restricts the generalisability of the findings from the study, we argue that the insights from the explorative study may be extended to broader contexts, as its utility lies in the proposed approach to exploring LDP participants' engagement with the

programme, and the implications this might have for design and implementation of such programmes.

The prime research question we aimed to address was the following:

How and to what extent do participants differ in the way they make sense of the benefits of their LDP?

More specifically, the following sub questions were addressed:

1. How did participants differ in their understanding of leadership as a consequence of having undertaken the programme?
2. How did participants differ in their understanding of their own role as leaders as a consequence of the programme?
3. How did participants differ in the way they see their own leadership development progressing in the future?

These questions had been identified as a result of two focus group meetings in which participants reflected on their learning experience while interviews subsequently with a subset of the focus group participants provided an opportunity to explore issues about the LDP in greater depth.

The paper is structured as follows. Following from a brief synopsis of the case background, the literature review summarises the LDP literature and argues that this has largely institutionalised a specific – passive – positioning of the individual in the process, resulting in an elimination of individual (contextual) variance during different stages of the LDP design and implementation process. Subsequently, a review of social constructivism and organisational sense making is argued to provide a more appropriate framework for helping us to understand the nature of participant engagement with LDPs. This approach informs the theoretical positioning of the study and in the context of this theoretical approach we then present and discuss the findings of our exploratory case study of an LDP. The final part of the paper offers some brief practical suggestions for more effective LDP design.

Case background

The paper uses data from a case study we undertook of an LDP initiated as a multi-agency partnership by a Scottish local authority. The LDP was shared with a number of public agencies in the area, and multi-agency cooperation at design and delivery stage made the programme seemingly unique (Scottish Audit, 2005). Multi-agency cooperation at design and delivery stage make the programme unique as does the multi-faceted approach to teaching and learning which involved 360° feedback, mentoring an d action learning sets, taught input in modules and master-classes. The programme aimed to develop in particular self awareness and emotional intelligence; strategic leadership behaviours; whole systems approaches to working across boundaries; creativity and innovation; ability to enact organizational development and change and partnership working. The design was based on

LD best practice and grounded in the notion of transformational leadership, and on the understanding, as articulated by senior management, of the leadership requirements faced by the respective participating agencies. The LDP design was clearly informed by current individualist leadership theory, stakeholder understanding of desired outcomes in terms of skills, knowledge, competence and behaviours, and current practice. Participants were recruited onto the programme through a carefully designed selection process.

The programme commenced in 2002, and was reviewed in 2008. Our association with the programme was loose. Our contribution to the programme consisted of occasional guest seminars, and part of the programme was hosted by one of the author's university. As researchers we had been invited by the then lead organization to examine the programme *outside* the conventional programme evaluation that had been undertaken by the sponsors of the programme.

The data were collected in 2007/8. What initiated this explorative study was the concern, expressed by senior managers, that the programme, despite its innovative approach, had not resulted in greater organizational impact. Senior managers argued that the programme required review. As researchers we suggested that a closer examination of participants' sensemaking of the programme should precede any further review of learning content and learning processes as changes to these might not, of themselves, result in the achievement of the greater organisational impact that was being sought.

While situated in the public sector, objectives, design principles and pedagogy are similar to those prevelant in private sector LPD, and our overall conclusions are thus equally relevant to private sector organizations.

Leadership development programmes – Key issues

The commissioning of LDPs – a one-way street

Our review of the LDP literature reveals that while this body of literature has been ever expanding, it has evolved along well-established lines of argument which position the participant as a recipient rather than co-actor of a training programme, and makes little reference to participant variance.

Although LDPs in the public sector aim for local solutions (Mole 2004) they share commonalities from design and implementation to evaluation logic that have institutionalised a commissioner-driven rather than a learner-centred approach to leadership development.

LDPs are designed to support organisational needs, enhance performance and deliver on strategic objectives. They are thus affirmative of the dominant logic and seek participant alignment with strategic goals (Cummings and Worley, 2005). Needs analysis forms the starting point of design as desired outcomes must be clarified before the appropriate training package can be assembled. The purpose of the LDP is to narrow the gap between the

identified operational and strategic needs on the one hand, and existing capability on the other (Gill, 2006). The extent of that gap defines the scope of the LDP. Organisational needs are established by senior managers rather than by (or in consultation with) potential participants (Loan-Clarke, 1996). The identification of needs thus remains shaped by the dominant logic that holds in the organisation.

From the start LDPs are thus defined as linear processes. But such predetermined linearity neglects the fact that programme participants will interpret and 'make sense' of the programme and its inputs depending on their individual orientation and situational context. As they embark on LDP design, neither designers nor commissioners seem sufficiently aware of this dimension of participant agency. Research addressing this interface is only gradually emerging following the pioneering work of Antonacopoulou (Antonacopoulou, 1999a; 1999b; 2001).

Blended learning is advocated as the best approach to leadership development (Bentley and Turnbull, 2005; Voci and Young 2006), and innovative and contextualised public sector LDPs are widely reported (Miller et al., 2001; Kaplan and Feldman, 2008). On the job learning, coaching, structured and less structured learning events (Loan-Clarke, 1996), action learning and the use of personal and work-related issues are identified as the most effective means to promote learning (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001) as they recognise the situatedness and social dimension of learning and provide participants with opportunities for "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation" (Gill, 2006: 289).

While this conceptualisation of learning recognises participants' organisational contexts and learner differences, such as career stage, personal characteristics or organisational backgrounds, these are not recognised as shaping determinants which might or might not affect how the participants engage with the programme input, or the way they read it. Blended learning, while allowing for individual pacing and different learning styles (Voci and Young, 2001), may still be seen as "didactic" in form and should not be confused with an approach to teaching/learning that allows learners to self-determine the process and outcomes of the learning experience, or shifting roles in this process. The variety of methods is not chosen *by* but *for* the participant, reflecting once more the linear-functional approach to LDP design (Gill, 2006).

The content of LDPs is equally prescribed by senior managers and designers who predetermine preferred leadership models as desired outcome. For the public sector, the need for both transformational and transactional leadership is frequently stated but other models such as authentic or distributed leadership are also promoted (Gregory, 1996; Grogan and Robertson, 2002; Western, 2002; Harris, 2004; Boaden, 2006).

LDP designers and commissioners assume a unitarist perspective as they select, from the array of models available, an *ideal type* of leadership. Content

is then built to achieve this outcome. Content focus is further derived from (in-house, generic) normative frameworks which identify desired leadership qualities and identify personal as well as organisation-focused characteristics such as personal governance and personal management qualities (e.g. self-awareness, emotional competence), business-relevant dimensions (service focus, operational or strategic focus) and strategic leadership capabilities such as change leadership, vision creation, partnership working et cetera (Hewison and Griffiths, 2004; NHS Scotland, 2004).

The aim of LDPs is thus to 'produce' individuals who display the prescribed qualities, skills, and knowledge. Method variety thus serves the purpose of channelling learner differences to produce a unitary outcome, not to develop in participants a more individualised potential of their inherent leadership qualities. That this can result in conflict and reduced programme effectiveness has been observed (Hewison and Griffiths, 2004; Berwick et al., 2003; McKenna et al., 2004), but again we note that this interface between programme participant and pre-set content and promoted *ideal type* of leadership is under-researched.

Transfer of learning and continued learning are vital if LDPs are to be successful (Belling et al., 2004). Yet the LDP evaluation literature, while plentiful, offers inconclusive findings (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001; Hill, 2006; Burgoyne and Williams, 2004; Hewison and Griffiths, 2004). While participants report increased confidence and local competence, there is no evidence to date that sufficiently demonstrates that those trained have actually developed and are practising the desired 'type of leadership' and have impact on their organisation.

In explaining such disappointing results, the literature emphasises barriers inherent in organisational structure or culture, and barriers to learning residing in the individual participant. The former include lack of peer or senior manager support, lack of reinforcement, cultural factors, work load (Belling et al., 2004). The latter relate to personal factors such as motivation, personality, self-esteem, learning styles (Antonacopoulou, 1999a) or political or cultural factors (Stewart and Stewart, 1981). There is no reflection in the literature that the underlying design premises and principles of the LDP itself, and its implementation mechanisms, might be an equally important 'barrier to learning' and 'barrier to transfer'.

We know very little about the participants of LDPs. LDP literature reporting, for instance, on participant feedback and evaluation presents participants as a collective. We know little about who these participants are, whether they are in early, late or mid-career, whether they are self-select participants, or 'conscripts', male or female. What we know is that the selection of participants is often accidental, or political (Alimo-Metcalfe and Lawler, 2001). This makes it even more important to understand how they vary.

Subjective variability in relation to training outcomes has been addressed in the literature through the concept of trainability, defined as a function of motivation, ability, personality but also context or work environment (Cheng

and Hampson, 2008). Combined with notions of development needs driven by organisational goals rather than in conjunction with individual starting points, this leaves the trainee or programme participant once again in the role of recipient, the programme inputs as treatment to which he or she is exposed, and the training outcomes defined by his or her relative trainability. The issue is to what extent individual factors hinder or help participants being 'trained up' to the intended programme outcomes. Alternatively we might ask to what extent the programme as a learning experience is actually constituted at this interface between content, context and individual variance. This shifts the direction of analysis to a socio-constructivist perspective.

The socio-constructivist perspective views notions of reality as the consequence of collaborative creation and construction of meaning, and consequently as a fluid process of interaction, interpretation and reinterpretation of events, encounters and symbols. In emphasising the interplay of individual construction and social relationships and contexts, it stipulates interdependencies between the two domains (Young and Collin, 2004). From this perspective organisations and their events present multiple realities or pictures which result from socio-cultural processes taking place in local contexts and individual and collective interactions with these (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 2006). These interactions may be relational efforts of co-construction of meaning, of individual efforts of sense making, and of interdependencies between the collaborative or relational and the individual efforts (Hosking and McNamee, 2006). Organisational realities are thus relative and local realities (Raskin, 2002), embedded in wider structural contexts which are reflected and refracted in local realities. Such interdependencies are contained in the way individuals talk about their organisational reality and organisational events they are taking part in, such as, for instance, learning and training events (Antonacopoulou, 2001). In the following table we offer a comparison of how traditional and emergent (socio-constructivist) perspectives interpret the key features of organisational learning events.

Table 1: Leadership Development Programmes: Traditional and emergent perspectives

	Traditional View	Emergent view
Trigger	Organisational needs	Organisational needs as framed by the participants' Individual needs
Commissioner	Senior Management	Senior Management with participation from participant, explicit and implicit
Design	Commissioned by senior management, and executed by consultant	Constructed by participant through individual sense making effort
Participant	Recipient of programme	Co-creator of programme
Programme implementation	'Done' to the participant	Co-constructed by the participant as s/he makes sense of programme input through individual sense making effort
Programme outcomes	Defined by commissioners	Determined by participants

	in terms of desired organisational outcomes = fixed	interaction with/sensemaking of the programme – which in turn is determined by individual variance and contextual variance = variable and uncertain
Learning	Linear process of cognitive processing, reflection, interaction	Iterative and co-constructed
Barriers to transfer	Practical, organisational, operational	The organisation's dominant logic
The learner	To be developed by programme	Developing through interacting with the programme
Issues of individual variance	Career stage; role; function	Product of cognition and affective responses to environment
Programme interaction	Reception of input; application of input to context; reflection on input/output	Selection of input through cognitive evaluation; interpretation/construction of input and its meaning
The self	Corporate	Individual co-constructing reality through sense making for identity formation

An important contribution to reviewing learning in leadership development from a socio constructivist perspective has been made by Foster et al. who emphasise the co-constructed and participative nature of learning in a post-positivist paradigm of learning (Foster et al, 2008). The authors argue that learning is the construction of new knowledge that is unique to each individual (2008: 509). While their contribution firmly replaces the traditional with the socio-constructivist perspective on learning, we propose, following Antonacopulou, that learning events are not just sites for knowledge construction but organisational events that are interpreted, made sense of and thus incorporated into an individual's wider sense making efforts. From this perspective, learning programmes are not experienced as objective or neutral events but made sense of in the context in which they are experienced. The outcomes of such intended learning events are thus, by implication, shaped and determined by these interdependencies (see Table 2).

Organisational sensemaking is essentially a narrative process (Brown, 2000) which focuses on the narratives produced by organisational members as the tell, reflect on, and reproduce organisational events and their own experiences (Brown, 2000). As such, sensemaking refers to the ongoing process of meaning construction, or construction "plausible images that rationalise what people are doing" (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005) and of attributing causality accordingly (Taylor, 1999). Individuals select cues and symbols from events, and through such selection multiple and disparate organisational events are ordered into and labelled as categories (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005). As these are used and reused, they become the lens through which organisational members interpret and enact their environment (Apker,

2004; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2005). Sensemaking thus creates frames of understanding, individually or collectively, and enable individuals to predict, comprehend and map their reality (Brown and Curry, 2003). LDPs as learning situations are organisational events of a specific kind and participants engage in similar processes of cognition and social interaction to 'make sense' of the programme and how it fits into their context (Duffy, 1995).

As LDPs can just be presented (and researched) as organisational events constructed through sensemaking processes, they need also to be understood in the context of identity construction, for sensemaking as a process takes place "in the service of maintaining or restoring a consistent, continuous and positive self-conception" (Allard-Poesi, 2004: 172). The reflections produced by LDP participant as they 'talk about' the training event as an experience that impacts upon their behaviour, action and sense of agency, "identity narratives" (Currie and Brown, 2003). As individuals make sense of their environment and construct meaning or knowledge they integrate such meaning into existing schemes of self or alter such schemes to realign with their environment, processes referred to as assimilation and accommodation respectively (Young and Collin, 2004: 375). Organisational events are thus inseparable from identity-constituting or -confirming processes. And as identity is linked to self-esteem and social esteem, individuals' responses to organisational events are thus shaped by the extent to which such events are seen as potentially enhancing or threatening the individual's sense of identity, self-actualization or belonging (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). People's talk about training events thus has storied quality to the extent that has significance for the speaker (Bryman, 2004; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Denzin, 1989), and that speakers will produce, reflect upon and contextualise their experience, positioning the self as the 'actor' in that narrative (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). They are, in Elliott's term, first order narratives in which "individuals tell [stories] about themselves and their own experiences [which] can be understood as in some senses constitutive of individual identities' (Elliott, 2005:12).

This leads then to the need to explore more specifically how psychological and social factors interact as organisational members make sense of an organisational event such as, in this case, a training event.

Antonacopoulou (1999a, 1999b, 2001) points out that interactions and interdependencies between individual participant perspectives and context have rarely been explored in the literature. She notes that more specific attention needs to be given to the individual's expectations of, and interaction with, training and development interventions in both the training and organisational contexts to develop a better understanding of the training-learning-transfer nexus.

Following Lees (1992), Preston (1993) and Townley (1994), Antonacopoulou (1999a, 1999b, 2006; Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2004) examines this nexus from a pluralistic rather than a merely psychological or structural perspective and recognises psychological, social, cultural and political dimensions as constituents of the organisational environment in which the training or

development event is embedded, and hence as variables determining the latent multiple consequences of training and development interventions. Complex organisational practices shape how individuals make sense of their participation in learning events, but equally individual factors will shape the reading of such practices and how these might relate to the learning event. Individual and organisational factors must thus be seen as a duality and it is this duality which, ultimately, determines how individuals make sense of being 'developed as a leader'.

Against this theoretical background, the notion that LDPs can deliver in a linear unitarist manner with equal input resulting in equal outcomes for all participants seems unlikely. Better understanding of subjective interactions is necessary to enhance process and outcomes of LDPs. Weick (1995) states that "how [people] construct what they construct, why, and with what effects, are the central questions for people interested in sense making" (1995: 4). How participants make sense of their LDP experience, must thus become the focus of our attention. We can generate insight into this process, we believe, through letting LDP participants talk about their learning experience. The following table summarises how the "meaning" of some key features of LDPs will tend to vary when viewed from the perspective of traditional and emergent (socio-constructivist) approaches.

Table 2 – Making sense of learning events

	Traditional	**Emergent**
The self	Corporate	Individual co-constructing reality through sense making for identity formation
The learner/ participant	The learning event is delivered to the participant	The learner makes sense of the programme design, input and process
The programme as event	The programme is fixed	The learners make sense of the event in the context of individual and organisational features
Identity	The programme develops the individual's competencies/ knowledge	The programme is evaluated by the learner in relation to his/her sense of identity
Context	Organisational context can be a barrier to learning – after the event	Organisational contexts shape how participants make sense of the learning event

Research setting and methods

For this pilot study we chose an interpretive case study approach as this would allow us to focus on emerging themes in individual narratives (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Boje, 2001; Robertson and Swan, 2003; Brown, 2000; Riessman, 2004). We chose a cohort of 24 students who undertook the programme between 2006-2008. The participants came from a range of public sector agencies in the region, mostly at middle management levels, but including 5 senior managers also. The gender divide was even. For the study, volunteer participants were invited by the researchers who provided the relevant assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of data. All 24 participants agreed to take part in the focus groups; 8 (initially 9) participants agreed to participate in subsequent in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to explore issues raised in the focus group discussions.

Qualitative data gave insight into participants' reflections on the programme, the organizational context and their self-reflection. Two focus groups were conducted by the researchers, each of which comprised twelve participants whose biographical background was known to the researchers. The focus groups were observed and recorded, and a written summary was provided by a group note taker. These notes were then combined with the researchers' notes.

Focus groups produced conversations and narratives in which participants related the programme experiences to their organisational contexts. The purpose of the focus groups was to generate themes for in-depth exploration with individual participants. The intended programme outcomes (self awareness and emotional intelligence; strategic leadership behaviours; whole systems approaches to working across boundaries; creativity and innovation; ability to enact organizational development and change and partnership working) were used as a coding scheme.

Data analysis indicated that participants' reflection (and sensemaking) revolved mostly around notions of self-awareness, strategic leadership behaviours, innovation and change barriers, organisational contexts and personal/professional contexts. These themes were then explored further in the semi-structured interviews.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to uncover any particular individual variances beyond the shared reflections expressed in the focus groups. A total of eight in-depth participant interviews each between 60 to 90 minutes were conducted. Of these participants, three were in senior positions (two male, one female), two in middle management positions (two male) which they had held for some time, and three in more junior positions (two female, one male).

The interview data produced were accounts of personal experience and as such had narrative properties as participants talked about 'what happened', for instance when they reflected on how they acted in the work place after the programme. Conventional semi-structured interviews such as ours have the potential for formal narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986). As this paper presents an exploratory case study, it was decided not to subject the data to a

structural narrative analysis using properties such as event, evaluative and explanatory structure as proposed by, for instance, Polanyi (1985) or Linde (1986) but to undertake, in the first instance, a more basic thematic content analysis suitable to identify and group emerging themes within the established coding categories, and to explore how individual differences might be categorised.

Findings

As we analysed the data it became apparent that focus group and interview participants could be differentiated according to their confidence in their ability to act and have an impact on their organisation, according to their role and perception of organisational context, and its (leadership) culture. Three groups of respondents were identified:

1. Three relatively senior managers who were confident in their ability to act, deliver on key issues and make a difference; this group is referred to as "*champions*".
2. Two middle managers who felt they had little authority to make a difference through innovative action and who saw their role as essentially carrying out their functional duties; this group is referred to as "*implementors*".
3. Three junior managers who were "feeling their way" in an evolving, cautious sense who felt they did not at present possess the personal or positional authority to act in decisive ways but who were confident they could do so in due course as their careers progressed; this group is referred to as "*optimists*".

In what follows, we explore our respondents' views of the key aspects of leadership to emerge from the focus group discussions and the interviews. Selected quotes from respondents relating to the topics discussed can be found at Appendix One.

Strategic leadership behaviour

Leadership was most frequently spoken of in "visionary" terms, especially by the *champions* and the *optimists*. Seeing where their unit or organisation needed to go, awareness of the contextual pressures and demands they faced, involving people in the development of the vision and its requirements, communicating that vision and being clear about its implications were common features of how leadership was conceptualised. Participants felt that having to acquire a "wider perspective" and "to appreciate differing perspectives" were important. Having gained the "helicopter view" was seen as a success, as was the acquisition of a more holistic view. In a similar vein, possessing a "future-orientated focus" and having both an "external" and "internal" awareness of operational context were necessary. Effective leadership was equated with an ability to translate "a vision into reality" and continually involving and communicating with people in this process. *Vision,*

holistic perspective, pressures of *context, communication* and *implementation* were the words most frequently used by either group, with vision and leadership strongly related to their personal agency.

The *implementors* were acutely aware of the limitations of their operating contexts in terms of their ability to practice real leadership. Conflicting and changing demands and priorities, poor leadership qualities of their superiors, the need for constant fire-fighting, no time for reflection, subordinates unwilling to take on more responsibility, empowerment and challenge were frequently mentioned as factors denying them the opportunity to enact leadership. Unable to see themselves as actually practicing what they were taught, their talk about leadership was largely in the negative, left to their superiors (and often done badly there). Their own understanding of how they wanted to lead was phrased more in terms of implementing clear, rational instructions and objectives. These managers could not see themselves in a leadership role so much as in a role that merely required them to carry out their duties as best they could in a situation that had few positive qualities.

Self awareness

In describing how their own practice had changed, the *optimists* frequently referred to issues of focus and context as they now appreciated, more than before, the differences between the strategic and the operational, that management was about the "here and now" and "results" while leadership was about "vision" and "followership". They remarked that the programme had "encouraged" them to take more "time to reflect", had enabled them to develop more accurate "organisational and personal insights", to look to "the bigger picture" and to be more "proactive" and less "reactive". These managers also talked about having to "step of out their comfort zones" and acquire greater understanding and appreciation of other aspects of their role and context. In doing this, they had come to a better understanding of themselves, their behaviour and their organisation and its cultural attributes. This growing awareness of the multi-faceted nature of leadership had brought a renewed appreciation of the importance of "people skills" or "soft skills" in getting things done. Participants placed emphasis on personal development and growth but very much within the organisational boundaries and expectations of fit and delivery.

The *champions* used similar terms, but for them these were aspects of leadership that had already been integrated into their day-to-day repertoire as leaders. Moreover, for these managers a reliance on "power", authority", "confrontation" were seen as expressions of poor leaders from which they were able to distinguish their own practice. Their reflection on what the programme had 'done to them' was more in terms of confirmation of good practice than in terms of personal stretch.

Conversely the *implementors* drew on negative examples of poor leadership when they talked about their own leaders at the top. Instead of commenting on their own changed perspective, the *implementors* talked more about the

barriers they experienced from such poor leadership. This, they argued, perhaps defensively, constituted major impediments to the exercise of a more enlightened and positive approach to leadership. What happened at the top was bad practice – and it was as if this stopped them from relating the programme and its content to their own potential and development.

The programme input was seen as positive by all. Formal input – such as an introduction to Quinn et al.'s competing values framework (2007) – was seen as helpful in understanding organisational context. Participants said that the "competing values framework" and the need to appreciate the "paradox", "contradiction" and "ambiguity" that often confronted leaders helped them appreciate the dualism of the leadership role, and to "make sense" of their own situations. The tool helped them "understand" their organisational reality. The *optimists* in particular saw the framework as an enlightening tool. One participant indicated that the model helped him understand "the journey I have been on".

The *champions* talked about formal input less in terms of new insight but in terms of providing structure to their reflection on their own practice. Noticeably again this group saw the tool much more in terms of confirmation of practice than the *optimists.* "I seem to be doing this already" was the verdict of one participant.

The Quinn framework had indicated to participants their preferred "comfort zones" and in so doing had also pointed out the "other zones" which needed their attention, not inattention, at times. The *optimists* felt encouraged to "step outside their comfort zones" ("I am pushing in the barriers") and recognise the value of alternative perspectives. The *champions* talked more about how they recognised themselves in one of the four dimensions of the framework – but where short on reflection about how to balance the tension and conflicting values in practice. Like the *implementors* they were more ready to stay within their preferred comfort zone and to use their trusted instincts when dealing with difficult problems. *Optimists* seemed ready to learn and change, while *champions* were confident that they had been and would continue to be able to enact change and guide. *Implementors* inserted more *caveats* into their talk. They recognised the potential value of alternative approaches as helpful … but was also risky.

The action learning sets as collaborative or experiential learning events and mentoring attracted a different narrative. The *optimists* spoke most extensively about the value of this experience. Importantly, they saw the value less in terms of learning, but in terms of the support these events provided. "I realised I am not alone" said one participant, while another called the learning set a "life line". Action learning sets had been reinterpreted as a support group that helped participants cope with their work reality. This was a significant reworking of the pedagogic tool by the *optimists.* The other two groups assigned significantly less importance to this tool.

Innovation and change barriers

Optimists talked about their improved practice. *Champions,* on the other hand, saw improvement of practice mostly in terms of redressing personal deficits. One *champion,* for instance, talked extensively about having improved his willingness to "delegate and trust my staff more", but also about challenging them more. In terms of actual change he considered any improvement marginal rather than substantial. *Champions* and *optimists* emphasised improved "soft skills, people skills", but *optimists* noted that they had become more directive and more willing to take hard decisions. *Optimists* were more explicit about expansion of skills and competencies and seemed to have gained in self-efficacy. They gave examples of their newly gained confidence and courage in their immediate environment, where, at team level, they felt they were now able to initiate change. Interestingly, several participants in this group emphasised that they had increased their ability to "manage their managers" – in other words, they felt they had gained in political skills which enabled them to navigate the organisational power constellations more effectively than previously. One participant mentioned that she had become "far more manipulative".

Implementors saw no improvement of their own skills but talked considerably more, once again, about the barriers they experienced and the culture of their organisation, often called overly bureaucratic, that did not allow them to enact more positive leadership skills. They talked more about why they could not do what they wanted to do than about whether the programme might have enabled them to become better at what they were doing.

For the *optimists* in particular, the LDP was described as a catalyst that would hopefully have more lasting effects. In reflecting on future development needs and leadership practice this group's narrative focused mostly on protection of what had been gained, and on defending protected "me-spaces". The LDP was seen as a springboard, "a boost", "a good start" – but it was interesting to observe how important the issue of 'protection', maintenance of momentum and need for further learning was seen. The *optimists* felt they had to continue to "push out the boundaries", maintain their learning and set aside time for learning. This group saw themselves as on a journey and repeatedly talked about the need to "protect" what they had gained, in terms of time, space, and potential further learning. Protection and preservation was the main theme in their reflection. Noticeably absent was a reflection on action, change or putting something into practice. The focus was more on the self and protection of their learning, than on the transfer of learning into the organisation.

Champions seemed much less attached to the programme. They emphasised the usefulness of having been given the time out, and how they should now really start and think more about what to do next with the insight they had gained. When probed there was little detail about how they might actually put the learning into practice – despite the fact that their role and position offered them relatively more opportunity to do so. The programme was not talked about as some sort of starting point.

The *implementors* were less certain that such a "widening" agenda or perspective was necessary. They preferred the certainties offered by their existing perspectives and while recognising the potential advantages of other ways of "seeing" did not regard them as real alternatives to the accepted way of things from their point of view. Leadership remained something done higher up, not by themselves anyway.

Organisational context

In exploring this theme, *optimists* focused strongly on how their organisation needed to develop in order to enable them to practice what they had learned. Their organisations were talked about as contexts which *might* change. *Champions* reflected much more about how they as agents of the organisation needed to change – but saw little need for culture change in their organisations. *Implementors* demonstrated a rather cynical view: "sack the managers" was how one participant described his organisation's development needs. Clearly the context in which participants were situated shaped how they engaged with the programme, assessed its transfer potential, their own role therein, and potential for change.

Personal/professional context

Another important contextual factor was more personal. Our *optimists* had this quality in part because, it could be argued, of the confidence recent promotion had given them. *Implementors*, in contrast, could be argued to be influenced by their being stuck at their middling organisational level, possibly passed over for promotion, and thus more sceptical (cynical?) about leadership possibilities. Finally, our *champions* had achieved the level of seniority in their organisations that had given them confidence that their leadership style was "right".

Discussion

There was a remarkable recurrence of themes throughout focus groups and interviews. Participants used similar language and selected similar accounts or experiences as they reflected on their experiences. But the study has teased out some of the differences which underlie overall general expressions of participant agreement. These differences in terms of sensemaking are summarised in Table 3 below, based on categories related to sense making and social construction of events.

Table 3: Making sense of the LDP

	Optimists	**Champions**	**Implementors**
Self awareness and self identity	Programme as confirmation	Programme as opportunity	Programme as 'not for me'

Self as leader	Programme as confirmation	Programme as opportunity	Programme as 'not for me'
Strategic leader	I am a strategic leader	I can become a strategic leader	Others are strategic leaders
Leadership development	Programme confirms me	Programme offers me opportunity	Programme shows me that this does not work
Change and context	I can change	I can manipulate better to initiate change	I cannot change

Participants placed different emphasis on the benefits of the programme. Perceptions of individual role (Storey, 2004), career progressions and importantly potential agency in their organisational context, and of organisational culture (Mumford, 1989) suggested different perspectives and the programme's value was located on a continuum from opportunity for personal growth to mechanistic box ticking exercise, with *optimists* towards the former and *implementors* towards the latter end of the spectrum. The data suggest that the interplay of personal, role, and context factors determines not only individuals' relative receptivity to training events (Antonacopoulou, 1999a), but *how* participants make sense of the event, and *what* they draw out of the programme, as either of benefit to their situation, or as an assumed intended programme outcome.

Participants clearly co-created and co-constructed the programme (Duffy, 1995) and in this process the LDP *became* a personal learning event for some, a confirmation of doing the right thing for others, and just time away from the office for yet another group. To that extent all participants related the programme as a learning experience to their personal sense of professional identity: the *optimists* related to the programme as an identity-enhancing experience which they exploited for the opportunities it provided; *champions* articulated no notions of enhanced self-esteem but defined the programme as confirmatory experience. *Implementors* often demonstrated an almost defensive attitude. Their sense making of the programme was perhaps the most ambiguous as they invested significant semantic effort in 'denying the worth of the programme in their context', and distancing themselves from suggestions of leadership. Sensemaking, as argued above (Allard-Poesi, 2004) is closely tied to individual efforts of identity construction. Events need be made sense of in that process, either as supporting, challenging or undermining the identify construction effort of an individual (FN). Participants clearly placed the LDP in this process.

Participants had embraced the prevailing logic of leadership as a combination of roles, tasks and activities of individual experts (leaders), and capacity increase as a function of increased personal competencies within a more or less constraining context (Storey, 2004). Such personalisation of leadership is the starting point of most LDPs – and it is what designers want participants to embrace (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2004; Mole, 2004). But the interplay of personal, contextual and programme factors exposes the limitations of this conceptualisation: those who saw opportunity to actually enact such leadership felt they had learned and tried to practice what they had learned,

however tactically; those whose context suggested a distance (of structure and culture) between themselves and 'leaders at the top' where unable to identify with the proposed notion of individualised leadership – they obviously could not see themselves as leaders so seemed less engaged with the programme (Salaman and Butler, 1990); and those who felt they were already 'doing leadership' almost over-identified with the offered emphasis on personal leadership to the extent that they saw hardly a gap between what they were doing and what they were, supposedly, to learn from the programme.

There was also agreement on leadership as vision to be communicated and once more perceived agency, actual practice and contextual factors shaped how this was interpreted. For *optimists* the emphasis was on starting points: the programme was experienced as a catalyst that had opened their eyes to what their organisation required. *Implementors* were unable to make the connection between themselves and leadership of this kind: their context clearly prevented them from creating this link or seeing themselves as responsible for shaping or even having a vision. *Champions* emphasised the confirmation of existing awareness. In other words, while an almost unitary notion of leadership as promoted by the programme input was embraced, how participants situated and thus potentially enacted this in their own context varied depending on how they had made sense of the learning event as a personal experience in the first instance and their immediate environment.

There was no reflection on whether participant organisations required anything different from what the programme taught them about leadership. Taught input was used as a template to apply to the organisation, rather than as a template to be modified, changed or altered. We saw little evidence of movement beyond this template.

Leadership development was seen as achievable primarily through individual improvement. The *optimists* talked more extensively than others about how they had become better managers: the programme was an opportunity to advance and this shaped their response. Their 'talk' combined examples of self improvement, better practice, and personal growth. But in their accounts they talked much more about local tactics, and one of the strongest themes was in their account was the protection of personal 'leadership space'. In other words, these participants, as they focused on the personal benefits, focused also significantly more on self-protection or defence against organisational obstacles, than on explicit action to overcome or address these, or on what they might actually transfer into the organisation. *Champions* seemed also, albeit differently limited in envisaging transfer as the programme outcome to them seemed to suggest more or less that they were already doing certain things and could only marginally improve. And *implemenors* kept their distance.

Participants made sense of the LDP in the context of their own situations and experiences and thus what learning takes place will be conditioned accordingly. Thus for the *optimists*, a supportive context and an enlightening

programme combined with their own biographies seemed to predispose them to wanting new ideas and challenges.

For the *implementors,* a less supportive context combined with biographies that do not perceive changes as possible or necessarily desirable. Their focus remained on a task focused interpretation of their own scope for leadership, with leadership proper being undertaken by top management.

For the *champions,* their biographies and exposure to experiential and programme learning over the years had brought them to a position were they were confident in their ability to drive change. The LDP was not necessary but "nice" to take part in as it seemed to *confirm* that they had been doing the right thing all along.

Thus, despite frequent reference to vision and communication, *champions* seemed to return to their 'normal practice', *optimists* seemed preoccupied with protection, and *implementors* remained resigned to their constraints. This LDP, like many others, had transmitted "knowledge *about* leadership" but had stopped "short at developing leadership per se" (Antonacopoulou and Bento, 2004: 81). The questions remains why this might be the case.

In part, as we try to suggest, the answer lies in the fact that participants co-create rather than mechanically absorb LDPs. If not reflected upon by LDP designers and commissioners, this process can limit the effectiveness of even the most innovative LDP. If this is to be addressed, the process of co-creation should be leveraged rather than merely seen as an unwelcome given. This requires a rather different logic of LDP design and implementation. It requires different starting points and a shift from seeing LDPs as an event to seeing them as an open-ended and iterative process.

It has been argued that more effective LDPs can be developed if commissioners and designers of LDPs replace their current "reliance on one method of implementation – the training programme – and its sole focus on changing the organisation by changing individuals and otherwise leaving the organisation alone" (Elkjaer, 2001: 450) with an understanding of leadership development as a collaborative process involving all stakeholders. This requires fundamental changes to the current logic of commissioning, designing and implementing LDPs. This paper suggests that a clearer understanding of what participants draw out of an LDP, and how and why they differ in this, must be at the heart of any such shift in perspective. There is rich potential here for a research agenda based on participants' talk about their experience, and on a more formal narratological analysis of the text they thus produce. The purpose of this paper, ultimately, is to point in the direction of such research.

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Talking about Leadership - Extracts from the Interviews

1. Views of Leadership

a. Champion: *"Leadership is about stepping outside the comfort zone … it's future focussed but also about informing and involving the team in a vision and a journey."*

b. Optimist: *"I now see the difference between management and leadership. I'm now more organisationally aware and think about culture, strategy and change. I'm changing my behaviour and using soft skills more with my team not authority and confrontation … you don't need power and authority to be a good leader."*

**c. Implementor*:* "I'm not sure what leadership is but I think the idea is that I'm supposed to get the best out of these people, get them interested in what they are doing, keep them happy."*

2. The Leadership Role

a. Champion: *"Leaders need to listen more and appreciate differing perspectives … engage in participative decision-making. My ability to bring about change is an indicator of my power and influence as a leader"* .

b. Optimist: *"I'm thinking more about the future … less hands-on, day-to-day management and fire-fighting. I'm concentrating more on 'the whole' rather than meddling with the here and now and realise the importance of delegating more."*

c. Implementor: *"I pretty much decide on what's to be done and I see myself as relaying those decisions and how we go about implementing whatever we want to do and try to convince them of the reasons why … I'm more operational than strategic."*

3. Future Leadership Development

a. Champion: *"We have to change the culture and encourage other staff to attend training. This brings challenges … how do we get people to engage and become involved?"*

b. Optimist: *"I need to build my confidence, not be afraid to say I don't know, continue learning."*

c. Implementor: *"We constantly review our work practices and focus on the tasks that need to be done. Sometimes new ways of doing things have to be brought in due to developments in professional practice."*

4. Development Needs of the Organisation

a. Champion: *"We need to be more externally focussed and meet its challenges. Internally, we need to spread staff development more widely and think of how we can release staff while maintaining good levels of client service."*

b. Optimist: *"The organisation needs to take my self-development more seriously. I've not had a proper one-to-one appraisal with my manager for a long-time."*

c. Implementor: "*We need to get rid of people who aren't performing but the organisation just won't sack people. This is costing the taxpayer a lot of money."*