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Citation for published version:

Murphy, S 2013, 'Commentary on Sowcik and Allen: Getting Down to Business' Journal of Leadership Education, vol 12, no. 3, pp. 51., DOI: 10.12806/V12/I3/C4

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

DOI: [10.12806/V12/I3/C4](https://doi.org/10.12806/V12/I3/C4)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

Published In:

Journal of Leadership Education

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Murphy, S. (2013). Commentary on Sowcik and Allen: Getting Down to Business. Journal of Leadership Education, 12(3), 51. DOI: 10.12806/V12/I3/C4

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Commentary on Sowcik and Allen: Getting Down to Business

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When I am asked to speak on leadership, and leadership development specifically, invariably someone in the audience will offer that “leadership really cannot be taught; you either are born with the ability to lead or you are not.” I then spend a few minutes describing what we know about leadership development and the evidence showing that skills can be attained. I also suggest that while athletes may come to a game with raw talent, there is much that can be and is done through training to hone that talent.

Historically, business schools have existed to educate management professionals, and although the concept of leadership has been a more recent addition, it is clear that individuals enrolled in courses in advanced management and technical skills are being prepared for upper level management positions or what we now call leadership roles (Khurana, 2007). Today, business educators design courses to reinforce and develop leadership skills across the curriculum and within technical specialties. However, the success of these efforts varies. Employment surveys still suggest that business school graduates lack some skills associated with effective leadership, indicating that leadership education within business schools may benefit from dedicated, planned efforts.

Sowcik and Allen’s paper, *Getting Down to Business: A Look at Leadership Education in Business Schools*, identifies a number of compelling issues in improving leadership education in business schools and provides a thorough overview of how these efforts could benefit from the considerations present in the National Leadership Educators Research Agenda. In a cursory analysis of the offerings in leadership within US business schools in 2010, we found that the top schools focused on comprehensive ways of addressing leadership (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). These efforts range from graduate programs that included a singular focus on developing leaders in business to those who offer support for student leader development while one transitions through an MBA program. A review of the top 10 undergraduate programs showed that many more are focusing on soft skills that support effective leadership (Murphy & Johnson, 2013). And as Sowcik and Allen note, at least one leadership course is offered at 45 out of 50 of the top US business schools. However, this does not mean that business schools embrace leadership education. Some schools consider leadership as a discipline less important than other technical areas (Kurana, 2007) and deem the leadership piece as too “touchy-feely” or refer to it as “charm school.” My commentary will focus on what we know historically about leadership and leadership development that can help support an agenda of improving leadership education and research. I will also suggest a few areas of attention that complement Sowcik and Allen’s paper.

Research

On the whole, we know more about leadership development today than we did 30 or 40 years ago, both from a research and a practitioner's perspective. We have sought to uncover the process of development, the content of development, and the ways to assess development. Meta-analytical statistical studies summarizing leadership development interventions show some strong effects (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009). These types of studies are useful in that they can provide guidance to colleges and universities, as well as business organizations, for choosing appropriate training techniques and models. Other research has underscored the complexity involved in leader and leadership development. Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) build upon recent theorizing and research results to develop a comprehensive model that delineates the many processes involved in leadership development including the role of self-regulation and development of expertise, and suggest a number of testable research hypotheses for future work. The latest edition of the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL) book on Leader Development (Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010) emphasizes a process and techniques that work. The Assessment, Challenge and Support conceptual model helps focus that process. CCL's work on leader and leadership development stand out because it marries cutting-edge theories of leadership, practical application, and an emphasis on assessment. In addition to the model of the process of development, CCL provides detail on research-proven techniques such as action learning, feedback-intensive methods, and coaching.

From recent reviews of leadership theory and research, we also see changing conceptualizations of leadership over the past 100 years. There has been a steady move from a more leader-centric view of the leader and his or her behaviors toward more comprehensive theorizing about the relationship among and between team members and the leader. These changes in theory have corollary implications for the content of leader development that must be incorporated in leader training. These include concepts of shared leadership as well as that of relational leadership, and the expanded consideration of followers and teams.

Based on this research evidence I will summarize areas that can strengthen leadership education within business schools. Specifically, I will discuss the importance of 'bespoke' leadership programs in which unique goals and objectives are developed to match the business school's mission, I will discuss the importance of understanding the process of leadership development, and I will underscore the role of comprehensive assessment. My comments apply not only to leadership development in business schools but have some application for leadership development in academic departments or student affairs offices.

Determine Unique Program Goals and Objectives

What is it that programs of leader development and leadership development hope to accomplish? In other words, leadership for what? For example, within a business school there may be a focus on leadership for innovation, leadership for corporate social responsibility, or leadership for sustainability. Large corporations tend to develop leadership training around what it means to be an effective leader within their corporate culture, industry, and country culture. Colleges and universities, too, could benefit from investing in developing specific models of leadership that

build upon their traditions and unique culture, as well as distinguish their graduates from those of other institutions.

In answering the ‘leadership for what?’ question, it is also important to recognize the difference between leader and leadership development (Day, 2000). Leader development is the development of an individual’s capabilities in leadership and includes self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Whereas, leadership development is the development of an individual as they are enacting leadership and as they increase their social capital through relationships. Although both forms of development are important in business school leadership education, each needs to be considered as distinct topics.

Adopting a school or college-level leadership education objective requires that leadership development efforts across a campus are coordinated. The most comprehensive programs occur at colleges that have departments of leadership studies blending a multidisciplinary approach and helping coordinate leader development efforts campus wide. An example of this comes from the leadership initiative at State University of New York, Stony Brook, The Undergraduate College of Leadership & Service. There, leadership development across the curriculum is centrally located in one college with coordinated work throughout the university, including features such as the “Business Leaders Program” learning community for high achieving freshmen.

Business schools do coordinate some of the leadership development in partnership with academic disciplines (e.g., law, engineering, computer science, and medicine). In addition, business schools have broadened their application of leadership within their schools to include nonprofit organizations and social entrepreneurship, as well as considerations of the role of leadership in the three areas of sustainability – environmental, economic, and social – because many students and organizations today are interested in making a difference beyond what is typically thought of as the purview of business. Another area of importance to business leadership education is the understanding of global, large-scale issues. From research we know a lot more about leadership in different countries thanks to the work of the G.L.O.B.E. studies, but are still determining what differences and similarities mean for business leadership education content, as well as delivery. MBA programs around the globe are identifying methods for offering their students rich global leadership experiences through exchange programs and internships.

Individualizing Programs to meet Student Needs: Understanding the Process of Leader Development

Not everyone is at the same stage of leadership by the time they arrive at college, yet most programs offered seem to assume similar background and experiences rather than offering content that builds on unique student experiences. Students come with many different conceptualizations of leadership as well that they have learned from role models and their own experiences in leadership positions through school or sports. Some already realize the team requirements, whereas others see leadership as an exercise of authority. According to self-regulatory theories of leadership, individuals typically assess their current leadership performance and will be motivated to close perceived performance gaps (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009; Murphy, 2001). Therefore, accurate appraisals of ability become an important tool.

Students have different opinions on how successful they might be in improving their leadership skills (leader developmental efficacy, see Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Therefore, individualizing the content of leader development where one can become very important in order to take into account starting point, development styles, and developmental priorities. Just as recommendation engines tell us our next purchase on Amazon, a recommendation engine of sorts comes from the use of broad-based assessments that help students, in conjunction with an advisor, craft leadership experiences that meet their specific individual needs.

An MBA program allows a specific time to develop one's leadership identity. Researchers talk of this as a liminal period between the letting go of one leader identity to establish a new leader identity with different levels of complexities (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). However, without making some of this identity work explicit, MBA programs load on the technical skills and many have difficulty building bridges between those requirements and the requirements of upper level leadership. Because of the recent economic downturn and sagging popularity of the MBA degree, directors are experimenting with new forms of MBA education to capitalize on this transition time. Many of the top schools do incorporate leadership learning at the individual and group level, in addition to other learning modalities that include introduction to role models through leader speaker series (Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Looking at a skill set is too narrow of a view of what one develops as a leader. Widening the conceptualization of what it means to develop as a leader is important as well as adding the emphasis that it is a lifelong learning process. According to Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009), leader development is really adult development (note: this book is a must read for anyone tasked to do leadership development). The student development literature serves as a backdrop for the developmental hurdles students must overcome. To become a top level leader in today's organizations there is a level of identity development, moral development, and cognitive development. Identity development focuses on the extent to which the enacting the role of leadership is part of an individual's self-concept. Leader development should strengthen one's leader identity, should move the identity from a novice to an expert, and should have a clear focus moving from the individual to a more collective view of the responsibilities of leadership (Lord & Hall, 2005). A recent study found that high leader identity and low leadership self-efficacy predicted who would enroll in voluntary leadership development (Pyle, Murphy, & Erwin, working paper). Those same variables can show who benefits most from a program and tell the bigger story when considering assessment results. This focus on the individual developmental process can encourage individuals to continue their own leadership development beyond their business education (Reichard & Johnson, 2011).

The idea of different starting points has implications too for how programs are assessed. We would expect greater skill development for students who believe they can develop their leadership (leader developmental efficacy), are motivated to develop, and are at a lower levels of capability. Individuals who are at very high ends of the scale in capability or at the low ends on forms of self-efficacy may need different developmental opportunities than programs are currently offering. Moreover, these concepts affect an individual's developmental trajectory and should be considered in the assessment process. (See Day and Sin 2011 for research paper demonstrating this type of assessment and research).

Developing a Comprehensive Assessment and Research Agenda for each Program

The National Leadership Education Research Agenda is clear on improving research to explore ways to improve pedagogy and to evaluate effectiveness. Two major ways to improve research in leadership education at the undergraduate and post graduate level within business schools are: 1. Conduct comprehensive assessments. 2. Incorporate a research agenda on understanding and documenting the process of leader development.

We know that good assessment starts with clear program objectives. That is, what is it that is going to change as a result of the program? Therefore, specific attitudes, behaviors, etc., must be identified at the onset of the program. With newer technologies in electronic surveys and text surveys, students should be assessed in multiple ways, multiple times, by multiple assessors. Timing of assessment is also important. Does one leadership development experience in college affect whether or not a student takes on a new leadership the next semester? The next school year? Or on the first job?

Accreditation requirements for business schools dictate assessment. A leadership development agenda therefore will require that the objectives are clear and that assessments are put into place. Creative assessments around leadership performance can include peer assessments, internship supervisor assessments, and performance in leadership simulations. In addition, knowledge assessments and developmental milestones can be incorporated into the program. Be innovative and unafraid. Do not wait for an assessment expert to determine what outcomes are expected in your program. Corporations have comprehensive programs for assessing the outcomes of their leader development programs to justify expenses.

Summary

Leadership education through business undergraduate and post graduate study is integral to preparation for many careers and has larger implications for our world economy, not the least of which is that we need well educated, thoughtful, and responsible leaders. The education of these leaders begins with base skills such as critical thinking, ethical decision making, and effective written and spoken communication. Additional responsibilities include a global perspective as well as a focus on sustainability through the environment, society, and commerce. Determining effective ways to develop these skills will make a large impact on our future.

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