Problem-Based Leadership: Nurturing Leaders During Turbulent Times

(Revised)

Structured Abstract

Purpose

The paper explores Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a useful methodology in leadership development during turbulent times. It identifies several pertinent action points for Leaders to lead through problems while understanding their capacity to empower themselves and others to face challenges at work.

Methodology

Broad concepts of PBL are used to distil the characteristics of this methodology and how they might be applicable to leadership development. An actual case of PBL in leadership education and training is employed to illustrate the processes of problem solving and reflective action-taking.

Findings

When confronted by problems, Leaders should adopt a learning-oriented mindset and draw on the strengths of others to generate immediate solutions for experimentation. In doing so, they need to accept failure as a prerequisite for creative tensions to be generated and applied in messy circumstances. Until they think out of the box, they will continue to solve problems in tried-and-tested ways obstructing the emergence of revolutionary solutions.

Practical implications

In order for Leaders to make an impact on organizational process and improvement, they need to focus on the ACTION and LEARN components of PBL. They should be given the space to listen to their own 'voice' and internalize the 'voice' of others through reflection and dialogue. They should also be recognized for their courage and boldness in confronting problems even if more problems are generated in the process. It is facing the goliath that Leaders truly grow to become real leaders.

Originality/Value

Although the concept of PBL has been around for a long while, its applicability to leadership development has not been sufficiently explored in both theory and practice. This paper brings another dimension to the common idea of problem solving where solution seeking is not an end it itself. At best, it is a means to discovering the potential of true leadership in those whose mindset is focused on learning and reflective action-taking where a current failure will determine a new altitude for future success.

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The mental models with which problem-based leaders operate are built upon their prior and lived-in experience, and the interplay of these mental models creates a dynamic mix of ideas and experiences that allows new meanings and social structures to emerge.

Leaders should free themselves from the entrapment of potential risks and ambiguities that problems could bring to the workplace. They need to view problems as building blocks for learning at the individual and collective level.

When problems begin to undermine organizational processes, Leaders must have the courage to confront them, live through them and most importantly create growth paths for business operations that outperform them.

Problem-Based Leadership: Nurturing Leaders During Turbulent Times

Leaders are confronted by many responsibilities and issues in current turbulent times. The recent financial meltdown has had a tremendous impact on the sustainability of organizational success. The creeping effects of impending change have led many Leaders to redefine their priorities, shape their expectations and seek new contributions. In facilitating contribution, we examine the way in which an individual applies critical competencies. For instance, if 'relentless pursuit of excellence" is a core value for an organization, the definition of what it looks like behaviorally is different for an individual contributor versus a manager. Thus, Leaders need to fundamentally change the way in which they do their work within the context of one such success factor to enhance and sustain contribution.

A problem-driven approach to developing leaders

In this paper, we propose a methodology in which to nurture Leaders in the face of challenging times. We recognize that Leaders can no longer succeed by merely remaining in their comfort zones by performing within their job boundaries; they are being assessed in the way they approach problems, explore the solutions and measure the results. More importantly, this ability is facilitated over time by engaging people in assignments or projects that allow and require that they change their behavior. This change is supported by training and coaching, and problem-based leadership is a great way to express and systematize how one constructs such assignments.

We use problem-based leadership as a management model based on the principles of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) which is commonly employed as an educational vehicle through which people get to try their roles and skills they require to contribute at higher levels. PBL is a process through which individuals identify a problem that is of critical relevance to them, identify learning objectives to tackle this problem and explore different means of understanding and solving the problem through self-directed inquiry and dialogue. There is both an individual and collaborative dimension to this learning methodology that seeks to promote reflective action-taking. By progressing this methodology to applied job assignments, we can draw a line between, for instance, PBL and 40 years of four stages growth and contribution research as well as the organizationally relevant successes this sort of developmental approach has helped to create [1].

Understanding the learning-oriented mindset of leaders

We know that 80% of an organization's valuation is ascribed to intangible assets over which people have the lion's share of the control. In order to build and sustain more flexible and innovative cultures, we need to increase the number of people adept at contributing through others whether or not their positions require them to do so. How do we facilitate this? The aim of this paper is, therefore, to identify the characteristics of problem-based leadership and how Leaders can develop their skills and competencies such that their contribution will be aligned to the strategic objectives of the organization.

We conceptualize problem-based leadership as a management mindset that frames changing circumstances as opportunities for clarifying organizational objectives and values. The mental models with which problem-based Leaders operate are built upon their prior and lived-in experience, and the interplay of these mental models creates a dynamic mix of ideas and experiences that allows new meanings and social structures to emerge. Such cognitive participation encourages Leaders to modify their actions to respond to an immediate need or situation. In actual practice, their skills are developed through meaningful work assignments, allowing their fundamental skills to be enhanced through further training and coaching. Through appropriate coaching, the problem-based leadership methodology will help transform Leaders to produce mission-relevant results and impacts during and after real-world assignments [2].

The twin-engine of problem-based leadership

We present two critical components of our proposed problem-based leadership methodology: ACTION and LEARN. In the first component, we use the acronym to suggest (a) **A**sk probing questions, (b) **C**larify your doubts, (c) **T**est your assumptions, (d) **I**nquire about alternatives, (e) **O**btain relevant support, (f) **N**urture your team members. In the second component, we use the acronym to suggest (a) **L**iberate the problem, (b) **E**ngage in dialogue, (c) **A**ct upon concrete ideas, (d) **R**eflect on the solving process, (e) **N**umber your lessons learnt.

ACTION: The propulsion

Ask probing questions. Deep questioning is fundamental to conquering uncertainties that surround an impending problem. A problem is only a problem when it disrupts work flows, destabilizes routines and challenges Leaders' competence in handling unpredictable outcomes. As a way of defining the true leader, it is essential that Leaders be placed under conditions of stress through complex problem solving. This will allow them to question

various aspects of issues that undermine their expectations of predictability. They are then forced to look within themselves for greater clarity and seek resources that would help them concretize that clarity. Asking probing questions narrows the unpredictability of the problem and widens pathways for experimentation.

Clarify your doubts. People tend to function under assumption when they are in dire need of immediate resources and solutions to resolve a pressing issue at work. Assumptions are mental projections of scenarios based on an untested series of actions that are expected to unfold in predetermined ways. The element of predictability is often times unrealistic given how complex organizational dynamics present themselves. To help increase the confidence level of decision making through problem solving, Leaders need to seek active feedback from and engage in meaningful dialogue with their coworkers to socially construct meanings and solutions that would have an impact on process improvement. An intrapersonal dimension of doubt clarification is self reflection.

Test your assumptions. Leaders testing their assumptions should ensure that their 'theory' work to some extent by being bold enough to innovate and do things differently. The approach taken should be one that is proactive, risk taking and optimistic. Expecting the unexpected is a critical mental-enabling strategy that frees them from worries of failure and prepares them for greater spontaneity in facing ambiguity. 'Testing' requires that Leaders step out of their comfort zones and stretch their imagination to a point where mental and physical representations intersect. In other words, it is connecting theory to practice. A fundamental way is to look out for cues from the environment to guide their action. Once an assumption is tested, it becomes a concrete idea.

Inquire about alternatives. Seeking alternatives in problem solving takes tested assumption to a higher level. It focuses on Leaders' readiness to take the path less travelled, the ability to think out of the box and the audacity to veer away from tried-and-tested approaches. It is more than just error detection and reduction; it is about problem exploration and solution diversification from which new mental pictures are formed leading to multiple facets of experimentation. Inquiry is both an intra and interpersonal mental interaction where worldviews are challenged to cause a disruption in Leaders' perception of routines and norms. When perceptions collide, a new order may be constructed through distinct categories of solution-generating which subsequently crystallize to form alternatives.

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Obtain relevant support. A three-fold cord is much stronger than single cord. If everyone on the team is focused on the same problem page, the manager, similar to a movie director, will be able to ensure that the members act out their roles in efficient and productive ways. Playing out the solutions requires that appropriate resources are available to help them grapple with challenges and achieve their tasks within a realistic timeframe. In order for the problem solving to take better shape, a strong buy-in is essential. Leaders need to speak to the right people and obtain the endorsement of their Leaders to be empowered in their decision making. Appropriate support garnered creates new values and objectives for collaborative problem solving.

Nurture your team members. No man is an island. Dependence on human resources is the only way to appreciate individual talents and draw on key strengths. Leaders need to facilitate mutual participation in problem solving and decision making through a shared vision. Common objectives enable members to construct meanings and solutions that directly respond to problem issues. Nurturing suggests that Leaders should give their members sufficient ropes to hang themselves from when faced with unpredictable circumstances rather than strait-jacketing them. With shared values and trust as fundamental elements of team development, problem solving becomes an inescapable way of life and a byproduct of nurturing. Leaders need to understand that in order to succeed, they ought to lead through others.

LEARN: The sustainability

Liberate the problem. Leaders should free themselves from the entrapment of potential risks and ambiguities that problems could bring to the workplace. They need to view problems as building blocks for learning at the individual and collective level. Allowing the problem to manifest itself in its raw form helps them to deal with it spontaneously and fundamentally. So often, all that it takes are some commonsensical steps to resolve a problem but it is the attempt to control and frame the problem so tightly that Leaders lose the logical engagement with potential, simple solutions. Loosening the grip on problems gives Leaders the freedom to problematize them in multifaceted ways. Looking at a problem through different lenses helps them see combinations and make connections to conceptualize better solutions.

Engage in dialogue. Leaders tend to indulge in talk but sometimes this can lead to a purposeless pursuit going back to square one from where they started. They need to engage in dialogue which goes beyond amplifying their 'voices' through talk; dialogue connects people at multiple levels and promotes the exchange of values and beliefs that allows diverse worldviews to intersect. Liberating the problem requires Leaders to step back and understand the amplifying and restraining effects of dialogue. For instance, dialogue involves a dynamic two-way communication process enabling Leaders to seek complementariness such that they engage rather than facilitate and receive rather than contribute all the time. The ability to juxtapose their communicative potential sharpens their perceptiveness and enhances their decision making.

Act upon concrete ideas. The idea of acting upon something in the context of problem solving is a proactive response to an idea or a solution that makes sense to Leaders. The ability to connect conceptual meanings to practical applications is a mental readiness to act out what they know about the situation and to be enlightened from what they do not know about the situation. Concrete ideas are ideas that have a specific process to a solution where there is an envisaged start and end point. Acting is also a demonstration of one's confidence and courage in responding to potential ambiguities and risks. Acting is also learning personified where the two are intricately bound. As most would agree, learning without action is dead and action without learning is premature death.

Reflect on the solving process. Sometimes problem solving can be a frustrating process as Leaders are often pressurized by the need to work out a solution. Understanding and growing in the solving proves is essential to the metacognitive expression of possible solution scenarios when Leaders engage in a cyclical loop of internal interpretation of an external event. They need to focus on the process rather than the outcome so that they are mindful of the route (solving) rather than being eager to reach the destination (solution). Reflecting suggests an inward quest for empowerment allowing Leaders to experience multiple levels of interpretation and mindfulness in the midst of a seemingly chaotic external environment. As they drive through the solving highway, they should do so with an awareness that the journey is to be enjoyed and appreciated despite undulating terrains.

Number your lessons learnt. Having learnt something can often times manifest itself in different ways. The question Leaders should ask is: Can my learning impact on others? If

impact is a catalyst for the unraveling of greater potential in others, the key lessons learnt need to be identified. It is essential that Leaders keep a record of the various moments of enlightenment in the problem solving process as these moments slip by quickly if they are not captured through the mindfulness of Leaders. Identifying and prioritizing the lessons learnt can help Leaders to grow out of their familiarity in dealing with impending issues. Being confronted by what is new, odd, puzzling, relevant, unnecessary or redundant creates disruptions in their mental workings so that they can truly internalize and perhaps actualize the value of each lesson. Ultimately, appreciating newness is a skill and riding on newness is a strength.

In the next section, we highlight a practical example of one manager who has had first-hand experience in PBL as part of his leadership education and training to develop critical skills at a level that is deemed as contributing to organizational success.

A case of leadership development using PBL approaches

Andrew is a senior manager in Mental Health Service, an organization located in the north of England. As part of a Master's Leadership program, he is completing a Problem-Based-Learning module in strategic learning, completed under the guidance of tutors at Leeds Business School in the United Kingdom. The aim of the module is to provide Andrew with the opportunity to use a strategic issue within his organization as the source of analysis, reflection, research and action-taking. By use of an identified strategic issue, which is analyzed reflexively, he is able to set a contract of activities to be undertaken, complete the activities and reflect on the results achieved. Figure 1 shows the stages to be followed:

Take in Figure 1 near here

In the process of setting the Contract for Action, Andrew was able to complete the ACTION component of the methodology suggested. Following agreement with the tutor, he was then able to move towards the LEARN component, beginning with actions to 'liberate the problem' which includes working in an iterative process of action and reflective/reflexive critique where the latter allows for a challenge to thoughts that are conventionally understood as truth.

Andrew was concerned that his service, in developing a vision for change, had failed to pay attention to the consultation process. As a consequence, neither Leaders nor staff had any ownership of policy and did not subscribe to vision. He therefore asked his first probing

question: *How can we create a vision that has the ownership of all Leaders and staff in the service?* To 'clarify doubts' and 'test assumptions', Andrew reflectively considered the problem by drawing a Rich Picture, a tool developed as part of Soft Systems Analysis to consider complex and messy situations of human activity. Andrew's picture highlighted the dominance of senior Leaders in imposing a vision for change on distant stakeholders who, by virtue of their lack of engagement, had no interest or commitment to it. As an alternative, there was talk of Andrew working with his staff as a group which would engender discussion and dialogue. As a result of this analysis, further questions were set:

Will all stakeholders engage?
What steps do I need to take to ensure 'buy in'?
How can I show leadership in providing a vision for the service?

A first step was to convene a learning group which includes service users and staff to analyze current strategy. To add to the dialogue, examples of success and failure from well-known cases of Hewlett Packard and Xerox were brought into play. Lack of trust and support among stakeholders provided insights into why strategies failed. The next step was to work with this group to 'act on concrete ideas' gained from their discussion by starting a wide-ranging and comprehensive consultation with key stakeholders. A series of workshops allowed a visioning exercise to be implemented, aimed at eliciting debate and discussions around planning, culture, leadership, workforce systems and processes. Rich Pictures added to the need for 'engagement in dialogue' allowing each person to provide feedback and interrogate varying perspectives. The approach of telling individual stories, putting arguments forward and hearing counter arguments, resulted in alternative ways of thinking and talking to emerge.

Andrew encouraged all participants to challenge assumptions and think critically, a step into the unknown and a move out of comfort zones. As a consequence, difficult questions continued to be posed about deficiencies in the service as seen by service users. At the end of the process, lasting six weeks, the most striking achievement was the sense of achievement which raised the morale of all involved. It was clear that strong leadership needed to occur in tandem with the requirement of space for expression and a part to contribute to a shared vision for the service. At any moment, the group could walk away from the process but this did not happen and this inspired a new sense of belief that if people are engaged, the returns are unlimited.

In considering the 'lessons learnt', Andrew came to understand the complexity of vision and strategy formulation. This included the engagement and empowerment of all stakeholders by providing information, consulting and participation. Andrew realized that assumptions are difficult to release and uncomfortable for others to challenge. He had to facilitate and steer the dialogue where he could but be prepared to pose more questions and build rapport. Finally, he could appreciate how his position as a leader required an appreciation of the variety of views that make the big picture. If he could refine that picture and make it visible to others, he could then move forward with confidence but always be aware of the need for further argument and refinement.

Concluding remarks

Leading through problems is the only way to make sense of the environment during turbulent times. In this paper, we present problem-based leadership as a management development framework through which Leaders engage in underlying issues and rediscover their greater potential for managing continuous, complex phenomena. When problems begin to undermine organizational processes, Leaders must have the courage to confront them, live through them and most importantly create growth paths for business operations that outperform them. Understanding that problems, although a potential source of destruction, could be liberated to generate a myriad of learning opportunities for Leaders, helps them appreciate turbulent times for the recreation of a much stronger leadership identity. To lead effectively is to face the goliath rather than running away from forces of destruction [3].

Notes

[1] Bridges, E.M. and Hallinger, P. (1995), *Implementing Problem Based Learning in Leadership Development*, ERIC, Oregon, OR.

[2] Yeo, R.K. (2007), "Re(viewing) problem-based learning: An exploratory study on the perceptions of its applicability to the workplace", *Journal of Managerial Psychology,* Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 369-391.

[3] Gold, J., Thorpe, R., Woodall, J. and Sadler-Smith, E. (2007), "Continuing professional development in the legal profession: A practice-based learning perspective", *Management Learning,* Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 235-250.

Figure 1: Stages of PBL in leadership development