Leadership and leadership development in context:

Expressing and addressing executive uncertainties

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ABSTRACT

The paper is based on data collected from a research project which centred around examining a leadership development programme run by the North-East England branch of the UK Academy for Chief Executives (ACE). It draws upon the leadership development literature, especially the more contextualised and nuanced work which has appeared in recent years. It focuses on an aspect of the experience and concern of chief executives which has not been recognized, let alone addressed, in the 'heroic leader' literature and polemics, nor, to the best of our knowledge, in academic work in the area: the uncertainties which these executives experience in relation to their work.

The matter of uncertainty was not one which we explicitly raised in our interviews; nor were we looking for it through participant observation. Yet it emerged from our fieldwork as a key dimension of these people's roles, and was an important influencing factor in their deciding to join the Academy and participate in the local Branch. Given that the 'uncertainty issue' has not surfaced explicitly in the leadership/leadership development literature (for that would be to admit that leaders are not necessarily or always the omniscient, confident, thrusting characters as they are often portrayed there), we hope that the paper will offer a corrective, and thereby contribute to the design and offering of leadership development programmes which do recognize and build in means of addressing these uncertainties. Given organizational complexities and continual external and internal change, perhaps such people will always experience uncertainties, but perhaps also some of them, at least, can be assuaged, if not eradicated, through appropriate leadership development programmes. A key condition of such a programme, if it is going to have a chance of success, is that a high degree of trust is established both between the members and between the members and the programme leaders.

In the literature review we discuss previous cognate work in the areas of knowledge and skills, career development and actions, behavioural uncertainties, the role of trust in leadership development, and network access. We develop a typology of different modes of leadership development in context, and suggest that uncertainties are more likely to be surfaced and assuaged in 'open' rather than 'directed' modes of development, whether such modes address individual ('leader development') or collective social capital ('leadership development').

Following the literature review, we outline the research project and the Academy for Chief Executives, present and analyse our findings, and offer a concluding discussion. The key uncertainties which we found these CEs experienced to a greater or lesser degree related to knowledge, personal matters, job/career, behavioural issues, and organizational contexts.

KEYWORDS

Chief Executive; leadership and executive development; uncertainties; assuaging.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst there is a lacunae with regard to executive/senior manager uncertainties in the Leadership Development (LD) literature, we have identified other cognisant literatures which do address the matter, and certain parts of the literature which discuss issues having some resonance to the matter of executive uncertainties, albeit that the 'uncertainty' issue is not addressed directly. We have therefore found them helpful in helping to frame and acting as points of departure for our research; they can be summarised as: a) developing knowledge and skills, b) career development and actions, c) behavioural uncertainties, d) the role of trust in LD, and e) network access.

There are a number of ways of defining LD. Mumford (1987) distinguishes between 'unplanned accidental', 'planned on- the job', and 'planned or programmed' learning experiences occurring outside work. LD can involve formal education and training, conducted 'off the job' through short courses, qualification- based programmes, and in-company training (Woodall and Winstanley, 1998). External programmes can bring specialist competence, a wider perspective, and up-to-date knowledge; internal programmes can help encourage team-building and collaboration, and link development to strategic goals. 'Off the job' methods include secondments, projects, coaching, mentoring, and international assignments, as well as self-managed learning through reading and e-learning. However, LD may require structured processes to help executives focus on learning, share reflections, and integrate these into existing personal and organizational knowledge/ competence bases (Hirst *et* al, 2004).

In recent years there would appear to have been a move towards more experiential methods, such as outdoor development, action learning, coaching and mentoring (see, for example,

Goodge, 1998; Thomson *et al*, 2000; Williams *et al*, 2003) to challenge participants' beliefs and develop their skills and knowledge. In addition, the focus of LD has increasingly shifted away from functional knowledge and skills to more strategic issues, such as leadership. Also in recent years, governments have increasingly argued for the need for improved leadership and better LD as keys to achieving better economic performance (Gold *et al*, 2003; CEML, 2002).

With regard to the matter of uncertainty, this is surely inherent in the executive role and in executive development, but it has been neglected in studies of leadership. Uncertainty, vulnerability and risk are interrelated (Newell and Swan, 2000; Atkinson and Butcher, 2003), and in LD participants may well be uncertain as to what knowledge to acquire and how, what actions to take and when, who to work with over what, who to model oneself on and how, and where and with whom to network.

Moving outside the LD literature as such, there is some recent work on insecurity and uncertainty at work, especially with respect to how they link to identity and subjectivity (eg Collinson 2003). Insecurities can take a number of forms, intersecting in the reproduction of occupational selves and power relations (Foucault, 1979; Rose, 1999; Hollway, 1984). Iles (2007:101) argues that assessment and selection processes for employees "seek to define, understand, assess and place them in terms of organisationally-defined critical qualities such as 'competences' or 'talents'". This raises issues not simply of efficiency or rationality, but of power, as assessment thus 'reveals and represents the form and direction of current forms of organisational change and the working out of the play of power within organisations. In principle, and also in effect, contemporary processes of ED [Executive Development] represent the moment when organisational restructuring meets and impacts on individuals'

(Iles, 2007:98). Collinson (2003:529) argues that 'the growing interest in selves and subjects within the workplace has not always appreciated the analytical importance of insecurity for understanding the subjective power relations, practices and survival strategies of organisation', and argues that existential, social, economic, and psychological insecurities at work intersect, impact on the construction of workplace selves and power relations, and are linked to concepts of masculinity. Individuals may attempt to overcome these insecurities through the development of 'conformist', 'dramaturgical' and 'resistant' selves, and these attempts may have unintended and contradictory outcomes.

Let us now look at what the LD literature has to say about developing knowledge and skills, career development and actions, behavioural uncertainties, trust and LD, and network access.

REVIEW OF THE COGNATE LITERATURE

Developing knowledge and skills

Many executives are recently-promoted or appointed into unfamiliar, difficult and challenging tasks. Garrett (1991: 12) refers to the tensions and 'nagging feelings and lack of knowledge as to what is competence at Director level.' However, the issue of what executive competence is, and how best to develop it, has only recently been addressed. In the 1980s, there was increasing recognition that *management* education and development (MD) in the UK was deficient in both quantity and quality (see, for example, Thomson *et al*, 2000). Competence-based models began to be developed, and MD/ ED (Executive Development) were increasingly recognised as significant levers of organizational transformation (Conger and Xin, 2000; Mumford *et al*, 2000). However, the focus was on management, rather than leadership or executive development. In our conception, ED involves the development of executives' knowledge, skills, attributes and experience to enhance the performance of the CE

/ director role. Evidence for the effectiveness of MD and ED has however been patchy; Thomson *et al* (2000) reported that MD had only rarely met its objectives, and that measures of its positive impact were often lacking.

Most evaluation studies have been based on interviews or surveys with the professionals responsible for those activities (Thomson *et al*, 2000; Russon and Reinelt, 2004), hence an impartial view seems unlikely. HRD manager respondents in the Thomson *et al* (2000) studies took a more positive view of MD in organizations than managers on the 'receiving end', reporting that the priority given to MD had increased significantly and was expected to increase still more. MD ranged across all levels of management, not being reserved for 'high–fliers' only; interestingly, however, it was most in evidence at the junior level, with senior managers/executives being the group least likely to experience it.

'Consumer' respondents to Thomson et al's surveys reported low levels of satisfaction with organizational MD, but much on-going, personally-driven development. Organizations in general seemed to have only limited and weak policy frameworks for MD; low priority was given to MD, in contrast to the claims made by HRD managers. MD in general was not seen to fully reflect business strategy, often failing to meet its objectives or to have had a positive organizational impact.

Given this overall level of dissatisfaction with in-company MD, it is perhaps not surprising that much development was undertaken by respondents on their own initiative, outside employer provision, making use of a wide range of learning methods and displaying a willingness to make considerable personal investments in their own time, at their own expense. There was a demand for further development to be formally recognised in order to

promote 'portability'. External courses and experiential learning were rated more highly than internal courses provided by the organization.

Career development and actions

The traditional career perspective focuses on organizational efforts to develop and retain key employees through individual career plans, helping them identify personal drivers and values, develop networks, build transferable competencies and capabilities, and apply these to their personal and career development. Such career planning may often incorporate self-managed learning and may involve feedback to help tailor learning content and development processes to individual needs in flexible, relevant and responsive ways. However, these initiatives are often aimed at graduates and other new entrants, increasingly now under the banner of 'Talent Management' (Iles, 2007; Iles *et al* 2006); their relevance to CEs is less obvious.

Many approaches to careers were developed in the mid-20th century, when the predominant assumption was of steady upward or 'vertical' movement within a relatively stable hierarchy of jobs. This option is -and never was- available for CEs (albeit that there may be opportunities within multi-divisional/multi-site organizations by moving from the current location), whilst many if not most of them work in unstable and regularly changing environments, all of which generate career unpredictability and uncertainty.

Careers are arguably now much less predictable, involving more crossing of functional, national and organizational boundaries, and more lateral movements. Individuals are more likely to be seen as the agents of their own career, and 'employability security', not employment security, is often seen as the driver of many careers (Kanter, 1989), involving the development of portable competencies/capabilities and career- enhancing networks (Altman, 1997). All this does not necessarily mean that organizational career plans are no longer

relevant in ED: a balance of shared responsibilities and joint activities between the company and an individual is often advocated (see Thomson *et al,* 2000; Iles, 1997).

It is perhaps worth noting that not all the above career models are new- for example Hall (1976) was writing about 'protean careers' over thirty years ago. Doubts can also be raised as to how widespread the 'old' career model of 'employment security' actually was, as it excluded many categories of people, including most women, many professionals, unskilled manual workers, casual workers, dancers and other performers (Jackson 1997), as well as CEs. In practice, 'employment security' contracts were often restricted to male managers and skilled, unionised staff in large private/ public sector bureaucracies. Similar doubts can be expressed as to how many people are now experiencing such 'new careers', but CEs are perhaps among the most likely. Nicholson (1997) argues that the career is not dead, but is undergoing transformation, given the widening diversity of career patterns and experiences. The contemporary career is becoming more variegated and more difficult to manage for both individuals and organizations, perhaps especially for CEs, who are at the same time the people least likely to benefit from development opportunities.

The career possibilities for CEs are likely to remain unpredictable, given continual and disruptive changes in the business environment. However, it is likely to be increasingly difficult to manage and lead organizations effectively without the continuous development of CEs to help sustain the viability and capability of organizations (Jackson *et al*, 2003; McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004). It seems likely, however, (to pre-empt our later case study analysis) that many CEs will have to go 'external' to their organization for their LD, as many of them may feel unable to show/admit internally that they need LD. This raises the issue of behavioural and personal uncertainties in LD, to which we now turn.

Behavioural uncertainties

Experiential learning in LD may enhance self-confidence through feedback, the observation of others and through self-checking or 'self-monitoring' (Snyder, 1979, 1987), where people regulate their own behaviour and monitor its social appropriateness using social comparisons. One such experiential learning process is Action Learning, combining formal management training with learning from experience. Managers use events from their own organizations, typically joining 'action learning sets' and undertaking development projects, with participants reflecting on, critiquing and learning from such activity (see Conger, 2001; Tichy *et al,* 1992). The primary aims are to stimulate them to think beyond their present jobs and focus on the challenges facing their business, in order to develop more general leadership skills and capabilities. Action learning may, however, work better for LD if structured opportunities for reflection are included (Hirst *et al*, 2004).

As Iles and Preece (2006) have pointed out, LD involves more than developing human capital or individual skills and intrapersonal competence- it also involves developing social capital. Social capital is often conceptualised as 'a set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them' (Fukuyama 1995, p.16). Social capital can play a significant role in employee development and talent retention (Leana & van Buren III, 1999; Seibert *et al*, 2001; Tempest *et al*, 2004). The means by which social capital influences organizational performance, however, remain under-researched. It would seem likely that executives can play a key role in creating internal organizational environments which promote cooperation and trust amongst employees, thus providing opportunities for the enhancement or depletion of social capital. Over the past two decades, social capital has increasingly become a focus of attention among organizational theorists (Maak, 2007), and HRD and ED commentators (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007; Gubbins and Garavan, 2005; Kessels

and Poell, 2004). However, less attention has been focused on the relationships between ED/LD and social capital, apart from studies on the links between social capital and mentoring (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007).

LD programmes, however, are often in practice *leader* development programmes, typically involving a mixture of competency models, psychometric assessment, emotional intelligence, 360 degree feedback, communication skills training, coaching, mentoring, motivational speeches and outdoor development. Mentoring in particular, where a more experienced manager/executive facilitates the learning and career development of a less-experienced mentee, appears to be growing in popularity, providing both psycho-social (for example, acceptance, encouragement) and career–facilitation benefits (for example, sponsorship, protection, exposure). Mentoring can enhance the cognitive (for example, the development of more sophisticated strategic representations), as well as the mutual trust, respect and commitment dimensions of social capital. Executive coaching usually involves the integration of assessment, challenge and support. If linked to 360 degree assessment, it has the potential to enhance both human and social capital by increasing both weak and strong network ties (Granovetter, 1973) and acting as a link between leader and leadership development.

Trust and LD

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identify three key dimensions of social capital: structural (social interactions), relational (rooted in networked relationships, such as trust and trustworthiness) and cognitive (resources embodied in shared representations and collective meanings, such as cultures and shared visions based on common values). Trust is therefore an important aspect of organizational social capital (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003), encompassing not only a belief

about the trustworthiness of fellow participants but also a willingness to act on that belief in situations of uncertainty (McEvily *et al*, 2003).

The issue of trust has become a 'hot topic' in various disciplines in recent years (Hoe, 2007), and has included the exploration by social theorists of the relative instability of societal bases of trust and its apparent erosion in modern Western societies (see, eg, Giddens, 1990, 1994, 2007), and also its potential value as a social 'glue' (Fukuyama, 1995). Meanwhile, organization analysts have discussed its role in facilitating global alliances and inter-organizational networking (Newell and Swan, 2000), whilst others have talked about its erosion in organizations due to breaches of the 'psychological contract' (Robinson, 1996).

As Elangovan *et al* (2007: 5) have put it: 'There appears to be a general consensus that trust is important and useful in a range of organizational and inter-organizational activities such as leadership, team work, performance appraisal, labor relations, strategic alliances and negotiations'. We would add to this list its importance in learning (Hoe, 2007) and in LD, as interpersonal trust can contribute to knowledge exchange and learning (Goris *et al*, 2003; Hoe, 2007).

What is 'trust'? Trust usually refers to an actor's willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence (Mollering *et al,* 2004; Huemer *et al,* 1998; Rousseau *et al*, 1998). Expectations of trust can alleviate fears that other parties will act opportunistically (Bradach and Eccles, 1989) in situations involving personal conflict and outcome uncertainty (Nyhan, 2000), and reflect a willingness to accept the possibility of vulnerability in transactions.

McKnight *et al* (1998) argue that 'initial trust' is not necessarily based on any kind of first hand knowledge of the other party, but on an individual's *disposition* to trust, and/or on organizational/group cues: an actor's apparent benevolence, consistency, integrity, credibility and ability. Affection- based trust reflects a relationship involving care and concern about a party's welfare, whilst cognition-based trust highlights issues of integrity, fairness, and the extent to which an individual has confidence in the other party's reliability and competence (McAllister, 1995; Goris *et al*, 2003).

Dirks and Parks (2003) suggest that specifying the referent (that is, 'trust in whom?') is important, because trust in different referents may be due to different factors. 'Lateral trust' refers to trust relationships between the focal employee and co-workers; 'vertical trust' refers to employee trust of the immediate supervisor, subordinates, and senior management (McCauley and Kuhnert, 1992). The degree of trust associated with various parties in LD may vary; fellow-participants may be trusted more than facilitators, or vice-versa. For Atkinson and Butcher (2003), competence-based trust is largely impersonal and rational, whilst motive-based trust is largely interpersonal in nature, and more affective.

Trust can enrich relationships and foster cooperation and commitment (Connell *et al*, 2003; McAllister, 1995; Zand, 1997). Groups work more effectively together in an atmosphere of trust based on mutual commitments and stable long-term relationships (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Repeated inter-group interactions can help build trust, leading to the eventual sharing of knowledge and mutual learning. Iles and Yolles (2003) found that a British and a Czech university were more likely to learn from each other in developing business education programmes if they engaged in extensive communication, continuous interaction and

collaborative negotiation. McElroy (2002) argues that trust can 'add value' in and between organizations by speeding up the transfer of information and the development of new knowledge. For Nyhan (2000) interpersonal trust is stronger when actors are confident that the other is competent and will act in a fair and ethical manner, support legitimate actions and not withhold knowledge or manipulate actions. The presence of trust can help create the necessary commitment and confidence in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge (Huemer *et al,* 1998). Knowledge processes involved in trusting relationships will tend to be informal (tacit) rather than structural (explicit), allowing the testing and verification of trust and greater mutual understanding. Interpersonal trust can promote informal/ tacit knowledge acquisition and dissemination among participants in LD. In low trust situations, employees can become defensive, whilst actions have to be justified and backed up by data, inhibiting organizational learning (Costigan *et al*, 1998).

Network access

Networking involves investing in and developing social capital, gaining support and widening perspectives through exposure to others' thinking and the formation of commitments outside one's immediate work milieu. Fostering stronger connections within social networks by developing environments that promote trust, rapport and goodwill among group members may yield positive outcomes for individuals, groups and organizations (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Cohen and Prusak, 2001; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). Networking can help build peer relationships across functional areas, creating enhanced social capital, especially if used in conjunction with feedback, coaching, and mentoring in LD.

Day (2000: 582) sees LD as 'expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes'. Unlike 'leadership competencies',

social capital cannot be regarded as a commodity, and one sole actor or 'leader' cannot have 'ownership rights'. LD here therefore involves helping people to understand how to build relationships to access resources, coordinate activities, develop commitments and build social networks. In order to do this, leaders need to develop their understanding of themselves and their social and organizational communities.

Leadership, then, can be seen as a social process engaging members of a community, with leadership an emergent property of social interaction in context. LD therefore involves using social and relational processes to help build commitments among members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1991), who may be internal and/or external to the organization, leading to enhanced cooperation and resource exchange (Bourdieu, 1986).

In concluding this literature review, a key observation that can be made-perhaps surprisingly- is that little has been written on the LD of CEs and other senior managers, despite the fact that in recent years have seen much more interest in leaders and LD. In our view, the use of ethnographic research methods will better inform our understanding of the above sorts of practices, using participant observation, in-depth interviews, etc, over an extended time period to focus on executives' experience of and reflections upon LD. What is more, given that longer term, longitudinal and experiential approaches at the level of practice are more supportive of LD than the short-term, skills-based approaches commonly found in much management/leadership development, the study of such processes is likely to benefit from in-depth, longitudinal and qualitative analyses which can draw out, *inter alia*, the uncertainties of CEs/senior managers and the ways in which LD might help address these uncertainties. It is to an outline and analysis of such a study and ED programme that we now turn.

THE ACADEMY FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES

The University of Teesside Business School and The Academy for Chief Executives (ACE), North East (ACE/NE) have collaborated on a project focussed upon the development of present and future executives and senior managers in the North East of England. The project ran between July, 2002 and June, 2004, with the objective:

> To assist the Region's economic and social development through the spread of effective leadership, learning and best practice within North East businesses and hence to benefit the community as a whole (News Release, 31/1/03).

This was to be achieved in three main ways:

1. The inauguration and development of 'New Leaders' Forums', intended to 'spread business learning and good practice among managers who are potential future leaders [and] also the heads of small companies' (News Release, 31/1/03)

2. The further development of the existing ACE/NE Group, and

3. A research and evaluation project to be carried out as part of the main project.

An explicit link was made in the news release and in the original funding application to the regional economic strategy of One North East (the relevant Regional Development Agency), where the latter calls for 'leadership excellence among current leaders and developing leadership among emerging leaders'. The release added 'The programme will help to realise this goal through peer-group learning, entrepreneurship and high-level skills development anchored in best practice'.

ACE is organized through a geographically-based group network covering the UK, with a central office in Letchworth, Herts. Local Groups are capped at a small size, with a maximum of around fourteen members. Membership is 'by invitation' only, but recruitment drives are

held throughout the year. In order to help ensure a 'full and frank' exchange of views, each group Chair ensures that members' organizations are not in competition with each other. Meetings are held on a monthly basis, organized and run by the local group Chair(s), usually held at the members' premises. They last for a day, and normally consist of a 'Speaker session' in the morning, followed by an 'Issues' session in the afternoon, and then one-to-one coaching sessions between the Chairs and members if these have been previously booked. The speaker sessions last for around three to three and a half hours, and cover a range of topics over the year, such as business strategy, marketing, using the media, motivating staff, organisational change and finance. In the issues sessions, members outline particular matters they want to air with the rest of the group; the ensuing discussion provides clarification and suggestions for action. Everyone involved is sworn to secrecy, and the discussion is recorded by the Chair, who hands the tape/cd over to the member concerned at the end of his/her part of the issue session. The one-to-one coaching sessions attract an extra charge on top of the monthly membership fee, and members tend to use them on a 'perceived need' basis; they are often held at the member's place of work. Once a year each Group holds a residential 'Retreat', normally lasting two full days, which thus facilitates more extended presentations and discussions, as well as opportunities to mix socially.

ACE central office runs an extranet for members, which hosts notices of forthcoming meetings and events, incorporates a discussion forum, lists details of members and approved presenters, and provides details of and access to business/management articles, etc. Nationally-organised seminars run throughout the year on topics such as 'Family Business' and 'High Performance Coaching'. The Academy also runs an annual 'Leaders' Quest' abroad; countries visited include China, India and South Africa.

The following extracts from ACE publicity material provide further illustration of its mission and orientation:

Our Purpose is to 'nurture an environment which inspires leaders to achieve their extraordinary potential'.

If you, as the most influential person in your organisation, can't find the time to develop and hone your own skills, then what is the likely long term risk to you and your company going to be? Chief Executives are often the last person within a company to seek out ongoing development. However, you are an important role model who needs to demonstrate the value of continuous learning and in turn reflect this behaviour in your organisation. Some of our members tell us that their membership is of far greater value than the cost of a non-executive director; in fact they think of their fellow group members as a phenomenal resource that they can tap into whenever they wish.

In the ACE/NE region, a 'Chief Executives' group (CEG) has been in existence for a number of years, and the twelve or so members of this Group are all experienced chief or senior executives of local organizations. In addition, a 'New Leaders' Forum' (NLF) group was inaugurated during the second half of 2002, supported by the European Social Fund and involving collaboration between ACE/NE and the University of Teesside Business School. NLF members are typically senior managers who have not yet reached the top positions attained by members of the main Group- putting it another way, they are seen as 'tomorrow's top executives/leaders'. The NLF group has similar objectives, but the two groups are run separately and in parallel, with the anticipation that NLF members will, in time, given their own career progression, transfer into the CEG.

METHODOLOGY

The authors had a number of meetings with the ACE/NE Branch Chair before data collection commenced, where the detailed form, timing, etc of our collaboration was discussed and agreed. Following this, the Chair outlined what was proposed to the members at one of their monthly meetings, seeking their agreement to the collaboration. He also proposed that one of the authors be made an 'Honorary Member' of ACE for the duration of the research project, and this also received the members' approval. The data was collected through three methods: overt participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis, outlined in summary form below.

Participant observation

As an 'Honorary Member', one of the authors was able to take up a 'participant as observer' (Gold, 1958) role when attending and taking part in the monthly CEG meetings; that is the speaker sessions in the morning and the issues sessions in the afternoon. Hand-written notes were taken during the speaker sessions, covering such matters as the questions asked by members and responses offered by the speaker, other members and the Chair. This attendance at meetings proved invaluable in helping to build up a degree of trust between the researchers and the members, and in extending our understanding of their work and personal interests, concerns and orientations. Discussions over lunch and tea/coffee breaks were also very helpful in this regard. It was not possible to take notes during the afternoon 'issues' sessions, owing to the highly confidential nature of what was being discussed: members would have noticed the researcher doing this and the relationship of trust (which we identified as an area of uncertainty linked to learning) could well have been jeopardized as a result.

Interviews

All the people in membership during the time of our research were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, with the interviews being shared approximately equally between the authors. An interview pro forma was developed and employed, and anonymity was, of course, guaranteed. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed and content analysed (permission was not granted in one case, and hence detailed notes were taken instead). In total, this amounted to some twenty interviews, conducted at the member's place of work, and lasting between one and two-and-a-half hours.

The interview programme began in October, 2003, and was completed in October, 2004, with the NLF interviews taking place later, between March and October 2004, in order to ensure that the people concerned had been members of ACE for at least six months. The findings reported upon here are from interviews with both Groups members, but primarily from the CEG.

Documentary analysis

Because of the honorary membership, we had access to the ACE extranet and literature produced by both the ACE/NE and the national office, as well as to some internal documents of the ACE/NE. For reasons of confidentiality, much of this data cannot, of course, be reproduced or referred to in the paper, but it has formed part of our findings and hence influenced our reflections upon practice.

The data collected through participant observation and the interview programme was analyzed through an iterative process. For example, once two or three interviews had been transcribed

and carefully read through the authors would meet to share and discuss their reflections upon what had been said. Whilst the interviews were being conducted and transcribed, data was also being collected via participant observation, and hence one of the authors was also able to offer his findings and reflections from that process. In this way, certain 'themes', such as uncertainties and trust, emerged during data gathering and analysis. We retained the same interview schedule throughout, but became more nuanced around and sensitive to certain issues/themes/matters such as these as they were alluded to by the members in response to our questions. We are, of course, unable to make claims about the generalizability of our findings in a 'representative' sense; however, we would argue that we are able to 'generalize to theory rather than to populations', based on the argument that 'it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization' (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 300).

Let us now move on to consider the data we gathered through the above methods regarding CE and senior manager uncertainties. The participants' reflections on their experiences of ACE membership are discussed under the following two main headings: Joining the Academy, and Participating in the Academy. The latter section considers the following uncertainties and how they were appeased through Academy membership: knowledge, job/career, behavioural/ relational, personal, and contextual. The letter in brackets at the end of each interview extract indicates a particular interviewee.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The uncertainties which we identified as experienced by these CEs took five main forms: knowledge, job/career, behavioural, personal, and contextual. The number of uncertainties experienced by a given CE varied across the group (some, especially those new to the role, typically experiencing all of them, whilst the 'old swets' fewer); also, many of them are closely inter-related and it is therefore rather arbitrary to separate them out in this way. Our focus is upon elaborating these uncertainties and illustrating how ACE membership had helped to assuage them.

Knowledge uncertainties: gaining new knowledge and sharing ideas and experiences

Many of our CEs voiced uncertainties over appropriate knowledge and skills, and how best to develop them. In the first interview extract below, reflection was being offered upon the morning 'Speaker' sessions. As with the majority of members, these were seen as being effective in imparting new knowledge and information:

> OK, there were two reasons to join: one was to keep learning and the second was to have a sort of sounding board…in most cases I found the quality of speakers has been good…most of it has been fresh and new and therefore stimulating, and I have been able to take ideas from it and put it into practice.(B)

With respect to the content of the Speaker sessions, there was a preference for presentations which mixed theory and practice. The members didn't want a presentation skewed too much in the former direction as they would not then see it as having relevance to practice, but, on the other hand, they did want some theory, for then a) they felt they might be learning

something new, b) it would be more than the speaker just relaying his/her reflections upon practice, c) if they chose to implement what the speaker was advocating, they would have a ready rationale to explain/justify this in their organizations.

> He gave us a book, and [what] he was talking about was just so right for me at the time because it is about letting go and leadership, and so a lot of practical things that they are bringing to it. What is good about it is there is a lot of good theory there, but commonsense that comes through, and there are not things that are airy-fairy, complicated, that will take a lot of time to implement and nobody will take any notice. (J)

It is not necessarily that 'solutions' to some of the indeterminancies and challenges faced by the members are offered, but often that the sessions help them to clarify their thinking, identify courses of action, and reassure them that they have chosen the 'correct' course of action :

> You actually get a different perspective – what you see as a problem, others see as a great opportunity, and they challenge what you are thinking, and sometimes when you are in it you don't 'see the wood for the trees'. They don't provide a solution, but they set you on a path which gives you the possibility of finding a solution. (I)

> What I get out of it more is maybe reassurance if you like - you put your issues to people and it reassures you that you are going down the right path. And people think 'Yeah, that is what you should be doing - that is the way of tackling it'. (E)

This sharing of ideas and experiences also takes place on a much more informal basis:

> Yes there is a team spirit there. I do pick up the 'phone to others and talk through particular issues…it has given me another sort of drive, another set of views altogether, a new set of people, completely different outlook on their life and their

business, and that is refreshing. (J)

Sometimes I got more out of talking to one or two of the guys over a coffee and a 10 minute chat, which was very informal rather than a big issue session. (K)

Members not only gained new knowledge, perspectives and reassurance in terms of *content* (marketing, finance, decision-making, etc), but also a *processual* appreciation about what is the core indeterminancy in organizations: people. This came about through the Issue, One-to-One and Speaker sessions (a member commented of the latter: 'I think the most common theme has been how people work, how to utilise the latest theory, how to develop people, how to develop yourself). The following comment is illustrative:

I think what it is doing is …helping me to become more professional and more focused, and understand the difference between how the culture can change without you doing anything, and change for the worse unless you reinforce that culture. So there is lots of best practices that I have picked from the Academy. (G)

Job and career uncertainties: Identifying and choosing courses of action

These executives experience a number of job and career uncertainties in the course of their work, and Academy participation helped in coping and dealing with them. Examples include how to present and develop themselves, and how to recruit, retain and develop staff:

Part of what I got out [of membership] was seeing how people approach business, how they project themselves…you learn that they are having problems with getting staff, that they have internal problems with managers, and we all have the same problems in so many diverse businesses…And that is quite reassuring…they are still having the same ongoing problems as we encounter, which comforts me a little bit. (L)

…one of the interesting themes that has come out of the Academy is … you go into these things and certainly in the back of my mind, from a personal perspective, I'm

not entirely sure what to do, what I ought to do next, and what do I want to do afterwards. (E)

This sharing of uncertainties can be seen as a form of *personal* development, but is also subsequently transmutable into *organization* development. What is more, it is unlikely that these people would feel able to surface such uncertainties through a more traditional mode of personal/career development ('Leader Development').

It's quite a strong cohesive group...We are almost at the point where we can almost say anything to each other and we won't take it the wrong way. It will be constructive – we might not like what we hear but it will be constructive… Usually, of course, people in positions like this don't have anyone they can talk to, so, surprisingly enough, you can't talk to your colleagues because there might be issues that affect the business or personal issues you don't want to discuss. So… for the business they [the fellow ACE members] act as non-exec's…they are very, very different people in that group, and that is a strength as well. You have all different sorts of perspectives – doesn't always give you the answer, but it makes you think. (J)

There is overlap here with what we have labelled 'behavioural/ relational uncertainties', and it is to an elaboration of these that we now turn.

Behavioural uncertainties: learning from role models and peers

The way in which the following recently-joined member talked about why he had joined the Academy can be read as an intention to conduct an ethnographic study of the behaviour and presentation of self of the more senior members:

You can talk in confidence to a group of people…I assumed that there would be people there who would be much more experienced than me. I want to learn from that...to develop an understanding of the place of the chief executives, how they deal

with issues, how they behave, what language they use, and the way they approach

these things ...This was my attitude- to really latch onto their coat tails and see what

they do and how they work, what has made them successful. (L)

This comment can be read in two main ways:

(i) a wish to 'capture the act', that is the mode of behaviour, dress code, language-use, etc, of

these CEs in order to self-consciously emulate it. If we use a theoretical lens which sees these

executives reflexively adopting a particular disposition, then it can be argued that they are

adopting a dramaturgical, social constructionist disposition.

(ii) attributing the behaviour, language-use, etc of these CEs to 'how things are out there' in

an objectivist way, and then reflexively examining oneself to see the extent to which one

possesses these features, hence where any 'gaps' might lie, leading onto an attempt to fill the

gaps.

It is difficult to decide which approach was being adopted by the interviewee, however we

think it more likely that it was the latter- take another extract from the interview:

I didn't think that the academic element of it was the identifier between being

successful and not. Definitely reassured me that it was down to people skills,

determination and the will to succeed, that sort of thing, coupled with common sense

as well. I felt that I gauged myself quite well against these other people…it is a safe

environment where you can question yourself and say 'Well, OK, am I that good, am I

in the right job, am I capable of carrying this off?' …'Am I holding my company

back, am I driving my company forward?' It was all those sort of questions that you

won't want to say in front of your peers that you could explore in that environment.

(L)

This member clearly recognized that there is no such thing as 'one best way' with respect to CE behaviour, he had in effect adopted a 'contingency' perspective on the matter:

> There were several people there who you held in very, very high regard, the likes of [X], great guy, come through the 'hard knock' school of learning, there by determination and hard work…obviously not the 'polished article', not the stereotypical 'pinstripe suit' chief executive- but he is very successful at what he does. And you start looking at these people and going 'OK, well he is in a particular mould, if he did it …the stereotypical way with the pinstripe suit and the suave and the polish, would he be any better or worse at what he does?' …What it gave me is the confidence in myself that I am what I am…because sometimes you wonder 'Well, OK, if I got a Masters, would that give me that edge? If I went and changed my accent and got a posh accent, is that what people are looking for in a Chief Executive?' They are all different is probably what I took most out of there- you don't necessarily need to fit into the mould. (L)

For this relatively new CE, then, behavioural/ relational uncertainties relating to the role of CEs had been assuaged through observing and listening to the more senior CEs in the group, and the range of behaviours and utterances he found displayed there had reassured him that he did not have to conform (as against display) to a particular 'CE style' as a necessary condition for successful performance in the role.

Personal uncertainties: developing trust in LD

Being able to share a complex/difficult issue in confidence with people who one can trust and who are unconnected with one's company can be valuable and 'therapeutic' in its own right:

> I got more benefit when I really had an issue…I came to an ugly patch where I was having a big fall out with another executive director- we were into an 'email situation', and I was really up against it. (C)

Even when one does not have a burning issue to discuss, learning can still be taking place though hearing about others' experiences and responses:

> …everybody comes up with ideas, and sometimes they are very refreshing ideas you hadn't thought of…it is listening to others, it is an awareness of 'Well I must remember not to go there' type-of-thing, or sometimes you think 'that could happen to us because I didn't realise I was doing something similar to what they are doing'. (H)

Quite often, what is being discussed at ACE meetings (even when it is not an Issue session) is highly confidential, and these executives feel unable to discuss them openly and in detail with work colleagues. This appears to be linked to their uncertainty about which course of action to take: they do not wish to display this uncertainty to their work colleagues, as they want to portray an image of themselves as knowledgeable, decisive and confident. As one CE commented:

> …when we had an issue, I felt quite comfortable raising it with the people in the group, and obviously the issue sessions worked better with time in a group where you are more comfortable, where you know you have gone through the boundaries, you have got the trust element build up. (A)

Three particular aspects of the ACE mode of LD are key here: the selection/invitation process, which ensures that each Group does not have members from competing companies; the requirement that there is total confidentiality in the 'Issue' sessions; and the cohesiveness of the Groups, built up over a period of time though the monthly meetings and other, typically more 'informal', communication and interaction. This has generated a situation where a high

degree of trust exists between members and between members and the Chair. As a member commented:

> There is no question that in order to have that frank exchange of views you really have got to trust and have that level of mutual respect, and I think that there is no question that that part of the format is very valuable. (A)

These CEs, then, were looking for reassurance that they were doing the 'right' things in the 'right' way, and participation in the Academy was providing this reassurance.

Contextual Uncertainties: gaining entry to networks

Reassurance and the assuaging of uncertainties about aspects of the external environment in which their organizations are located can come about through another route linked to ACE membership- invitations to external events, for example through the ACE branch Chair:

> Certain things exposed us to different levels, mainly via [an ACE Branch Chair], in the diplomatic circles that he is in…it is a whole different process that you didn't know a lot about unless you were part of it. So we went to the consulate ball and met various people, and what was reassuring is that there is a whole different circle out there…Reassurance is probably the main word, in that I didn't know how good or bad I was…as a benchmark [against] other people. (E)

New external- organization business contacts are also made through other members. Rather surprisingly, for example, it had not always proved easy for some of them to make key contacts with regional governmental bodies:

> It [ACE membership] has proved extremely helpful on another level, and that is networking… one thing you have got in that group [is] people who have a very strong set of contacts, and I was able to get contacts in various associations that I would not have been able to do. I know that 'cause I tried… we have even started doing it as a

Group now, so the Group itself will want to meet up with other people and make their views known…It's almost started acting as an entity on its own. (J)

The Group had, indeed, over time come to act collectively in expanding its and individual member's contacts and networks in furtherance of their interests. They (not the Chair), for example, had invited influential people from the region to address the Group:

X [a leading member] of [the Regional Development Agency] came to see us… which was brought about by the Group using its position as the Academy and [one of the Group members] on the RDA Board arranging for [X] to come to speak to us …I made [him] aware of construction issues, and I got a 'phone call from him and I went to see him… it raised the agenda, and from there I met [another senior member of the RDA]. I do have contacts now within [the RDA] at the highest level. (F)

The Chair had already been inviting such people to the Speaker sessions, but here we see how the members themselves had come over time to take such networking initiatives on their own and/or the group's behalf.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The uncertainties experienced by CEs in the course of their work and in LD programmes have not been captured in the training and development literature to date. This is in part because of the methodological and research methods commonly employed by people working in this area: briefly, there has been only limited use of longitudinal, processual, case study methodologies utilizing intensive and extensive interviewing and participant observation of LD programmes 'in action'. It is also, perhaps, to do with the typically more individualistic/psychological orientation of much of this research, which often neglects action in its social and organizational contexts. Yet, there is a need to recognize these various

uncertainties, both as an aspect of the CE organizational experience, and for the purpose of designing and operationalizing LD initiatives for such people.

We have identified five such uncertainties (there may well be more): knowledge, job/career, behavioural/ relational, personal, and contextual. What is more, if the focus is upon LD and social capital, then it is crucial in our view to take cognizance of and address the issue of 'trust'-both between the CEs and the trainers/facilitators, and, if other CEs are involved, within the CE group itself.

An interesting issue for further exploration is how we should conceptualise and understand the responses to uncertainty made by the CEs in our study. It could be seen at times that they were engaging in a variety of what Collinson (2003) terms 'survival practices' to protect and secure themselves in uncertain contexts where (both as CEs and as participants in an LD programme) they were 'under surveillance'. From a Foucauldian perspective, this produces disciplined and 'conformist' selves through various processes of 'identity regulation'. Iles (2007: 101) sees assessment 'as part of the government of organisations and the regulation of individuals, including their subjectivity…The focus is on the role of the appraiser/ assessor as both regulator and judge/confessor, and the appraised/ assessed as an object of power/knowledge, as well as a self-regulating agent. The assessment/ appraisal instrument is seen as part of a technology of power and regulation'. One might see the facilitators of LD programmes, as well as fellow-participants, as both regulators and as judges/ confessors, and participants as both objects of power/ knowledge and as self-regulating agents. From this perspective, LD programmes might also be seen as part of a technology of power and regulation.

Certainly one could interpret some of their responses in this light-for example, what the 'right' behaviour, 'correct' language, and 'appropriate' style might be as a CE, who was the 'right model' to imitate, and what were the 'appropriate' networks to access. Such concerns are evident in the self-monitoring and impression-management behaviours manifested by many participants. One example of a 'conformist self' is the pursuit of a successful career, and we have identified this area as a key source of anxiety/ uncertainty which participants seek to assuage through LD. Identity construction and protection are clearly as much concerns of executives as for the subordinated employees more typically studied from this perspective.

However, this is not the only interpretation, It is not just surveillance systems, but LD programmes as well, that make individuals increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects under the gaze of others (in the case of our CEs, not so much authorities as peers and facilitators). As Collinson (2003) points out, this does not inevitable produce 'conformist selves'; it may produce 'dramaturgical selves', increasingly skilled manipulators and impression-managers of self, reputation, brand and image in the eyes of significant others like peers and facilitators. CEs can become increasingly competent at 'choreographing' their own behaviours, practices and actions in reaction to monitoring in an ED programme in an 'ambiguous and shifting amalgam of compliance and opposition' (Collinson, 2003: 539).

At times, CEs also seemed to construct 'resistance selves' to express their discontent with the ED programme, constructing an alternative, more positive sense of self to that provided. For example, they would criticise the 'inflexible' or 'dogmatic' style of a chair, suggest amendments to the programme, and take the initiative in inviting certain speakers. At the moment, the literature on leader/manager development and LD, whilst it addresses some matters pertinent to LD such as knowledge acquisition, careers, behaviour, and networking, does not explicitly or adequately address the sort of uncertainties which our CEs feel/experience in the course of their work and in relation to participating in a LD programme.

It seems to us that there is more chance of this happening, and of these uncertainties explicitly surfacing and being assuaged, where the LD programme takes a more open/emergent and collective form, targeting both human capital/leader development and social capital/leadership development, such as in the Academy of Chief Executives. Further research needs to address how such ED may be a mechanism through which investments in social capital, including in trust and in networks, can be translated into positive benefits and outcomes for organizations, teams and individuals.

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