

Stream 9: Management Education and Development

Competitive Session

Leadership identity: using artefacts (and storytelling) to discover new insights.

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ABSTRACT:

Artefacts are used in management education to reflect upon the experiences of participants. Story-telling has a leadership influence that is long recognised in the leadership literature. However, artefacts and story-telling have not been used concurrently in leadership and management development programmes. We used artefacts combined with story-telling to help participants understand their leadership identity. Louisa's story and artefact are the basis of this research. We found that the story-teller gained a clearer image of their leadership identity; and engaged in more effective leadership. We also found that the audience members gained a clearer notion of their leadership identity. Implications for organizational leadership and management development programmes are posited.

Keywords: Leadership development, skills development/training, team building, experiential/student-centered learning, active learning, management education.

BACKGROUND

We describe an activity which allows the story behind and associated with a personal artefact to be shared amongst a group, and for listeners of the story to ask questions of the story teller. This activity allows individuals to connect these dual aspects of choosing an artefact and telling a story to identify new insights into their own leadership learning and leadership identity. Further, it enables new insights into the leadership identity of the listener. More research is needed into the use of artefacts and storytelling to illuminate aspects of leadership. The area is little understood and hence the reason for this paper.

An artefact is defined as an object that is made by a human being. Typically it is an object of cultural or historical interest. An artefact is durable, public, and materially present (Kafai, 2006).

Artefacts are sometimes naturalistic objects. Although the use of artefacts in education has a rich history, particularly with primary school education, it is an under researched area within management

education and leadership learning. Artefacts are valuable ways for people to link important events and memories that they can construct stories around (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004).

Pattison (2007) describes the significance of the numerous humble artefacts found in the everyday world, which are overlooked. Perhaps they are even invisible when contrasted with the depth of examination and attention paid to 'high-art' objects such as paintings, drawings and sculptures which are less common and not typically used or accessible as everyday objects. He proposes methods to draw on the relationship and sense-making that can be gained through seeing and connecting with these more humble artefacts.

Ward and Shortt (2013) espouse the opportunity for using artefacts in a management education context to enable participants to reflect upon prior experiences. Some scholars have considered the use of artefacts through mediums such as film, whereby the film is the artefact. Rajendran and Martin (2014) and Jackson and Parry (2011) emphasise how films can create a rich, stimulating and engaging way for participants to analyse and reflect upon their leadership effectiveness. However, the use of a personal artefact selected by the interviewee as an object that has leadership significance for that person, is a new area of research for leadership learning. It is a method that has been used by one of the authors over a period of time and found to be extremely effective in providing glimpses into aspects of an individual that would perhaps otherwise be closed off. Significant insights are often shared through the process of telling the story associated with the artefact; insights which provide a set of rich and meaningful experiences that have contributed to the process of the participant becoming better at leadership.

Storytelling is gaining popularity in a higher education context with several studies demonstrating the uses of storytelling as a reflective and learning process (Clandinin and Connolly, 1998; McDrury and Alterio, 2003; Moon 2010). Storytelling is extensively used in some areas of professional practice, most widely in nursing and teacher education (McDrury and Alterio, 2003; Moon and Fowler, 2008).

As human beings, the ability and interest in telling and listening to stories dates back thousands of years and is one of the earliest experiences we will have had as a child. McEwan and Egan (1995: viii) describe it as 'a narrative, and that particular form of narrative that we call a story,

deals in facts or ideas or theories or even dreams, fears and hopes, but in facts, theories and dreams from the perspective of someone's life and in the context of someone's emotions'.

Storytelling from an organization perspective has been researched for several decades. Boje (1991) described the theory of organizations being a storytelling system which allowed employees and others associated with the organization to make sense of events and the culture of the organization through the telling and re-telling of stories. This idea was developed further by Parry and Hansen who proposed that 'organizational stories can operate like leaders and exhibit the functions of leadership' (Parry & Hansen, 2007:294). Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist further developed the ideas around leadership and storytelling in their 2013 study. Their findings indicated that managers told leadership stories to help build trust with their followers and as a process for self-development.

The coupling of artefacts and storytelling is a far less researched area, even though the telling of the story is so axiomatic of the role of the artefact in management learning. Some studies have been done in anthropology (Hoskins, 1998), creative arts (Gauntlett, 2007) and theology (Pattison, 2007), however we have not been able to identify any studies from a management education context. Combining personal artefacts and storytelling allows programme participants to select an artefact that has meaning for them and then for them to choose which parts of their story to tell. Hoskins (1998) used biographical objects to study the Kodi society in Eastern Indonesia. She described the process of narrative creation through objects as being 'significant because of the ways they are remembered, hoarded, or used as objects of fantasy and desire. They are used to reify characteristics of personhood that must then be narratively organized into an identity' (Hoskins, 1998:24). Hoskins (1998:198) summarised this process as a 'metaphor for the self'.

It is the life experience and emotions that are frequently exposed through the personal artefacts activity. Further, our use of artefacts and storytelling affords similar insights into the leadership learning and identity of the participants. To begin our research exploration into the use of artefacts and storytelling linked to leadership identity our research questions are:

RQ1: What types of artefacts and stories do people choose to represent their leadership identity?

RQ2: What new insights do we gain into leadership learning through the use of personal artefacts and storytelling?

THE ACTIVITY

The leadership artefacts activity is one of several activities that we use on our leadership programmes. We use different forms of artefacts and storytelling in our leadership development programmes to help individuals with the creation of a narrative. This we suggest is a core feature in helping people to organise their lived experience in meaningful ways. Clandinin and Connelly (2004: xxvi) stated that ‘experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others’. Moon (2010) concurs, stating that stories are able to achieve universal appeal and the significance of stories for humanity through their relationship with culture and community. We suggest that these stories help people to understand the lived experience of leadership, factors like sense-making, emotional connection, the stress of change, the management of meaning cognitive impact, and so on.

Reflection is a key part of this activity. There is a period of reflection before the activity is undertaken, with individuals considering and selecting an artefact that they would like to share and the metaphors they identify between the object and their leadership practice. There is then reflection during and after the activity has taken place. This process can take the form of individual reflection on the telling of the story itself; from the comments and questions from the group, and also from the stories and artefacts other group members have shared. This process of telling stories about practice is a recognised method for teaching and a valuable tool for developing reflective and critical thinking (McDrury and Alterio, 2003; Moon, 2004, 2010).

There are many different ways in which artefacts and storytelling could be used on a leadership development course. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on how we have used the activity within our programmes. This is an oral storytelling method drawing on a manager’s personal experience. It is used in a formal setting (i.e. dedicated time scheduled event); with multiple listeners (e.g. in a group); with an opportunity for reflected dialogue (as per a discussion about the story between participants); and uses a pre-determined story (the storyteller has had time to choose a story

and will have reflected on past experience and practice as part of this process). As McDrury and Alterio (2003) told us, this particular combination of storytelling elements provides a process for the greatest opportunity for significant learning to occur and with the most likely change in practice. The artefact chosen should hold some of the personal characteristics of its owner. Also, there is a localised, historical, unique relationship between the object and its owner (Hoskins 1998). The artefact may be a humble, everyday object which holds significance for its owner (Pattinson 2007). Tomkins (2009) describes this approach as ‘active learning’ or a series of staged activities, intrinsic to the design of a programme, which enables participants to reflect upon past aspects of their personal and professional development and, to hopefully, create future actions in order to develop and apply their new ideas and thinking.

Ice-breaking. We frequently use this session within small groups, very often at the start of a programme when participants have come together for the first time. It is used to help participants to get to know one another and, in addition, to get to know the programme staff. Each person, including the facilitators, brings with them an artefact that has leadership significance for them and passes their object around their group whilst telling the story behind the artefact and the associated meaning it has to them.

Hornyak, Green, and Heppard (2007:139) describe participants undertaking this type of activity as ‘intentional learners’. Participants swiftly adapt to different environments, and assimilate knowledge from a wide range of sources. These are then used to develop lifelong learning skills. Similarly, Raelin (2000) identifies the value of reflection from a work-based learning perspective which affords group participants an opportunity to share and discuss issues and then identify potential solutions.

Of note is the opportunity through this activity for participants to undertake a process of sense-making in connection to their leadership learning. Kempster (2006) suggests that this process builds upon the notion of ‘learning by doing’ or experiential learning, which encompasses aspects of observation and participation in a variety of contexts. The design of this activity creates a relatively safe space and moment of time for participants to do this. Further, in a leadership context, the activity enables participants to connect with the value of studying leadership itself. Jackson and Parry (2011)

describe this process as doing, seeing, talking, reading and writing about leadership which, as a method, helps people to understand what good leadership looks like.

What the activity does

The exercise creates an opportunity for people to share something of themselves in a very personal way which, typically, might not happen at the start of a programme, and indeed might not happen at all. It is a process Gauntlett describes as a way ‘in which people can, and do, communicate messages or impressions to others about themselves’ (2007:2). A number of the stories resonate with an individual’s values or leadership rules of thumb that are important to the individual and their approach to life. We gain access to aspects of an individual that are often off limits; meaningful insights that are shared between people who do not know one another that well together with a depth to those experiences that have shaped them in becoming a leader.

These insights and sense making are supported by Bolden (2006) in his integrated framework for leadership development. Diagrammatically, he describes the need for an individual to consider ‘who am I and why am I here’ within a context of ‘occupation, personality and life experience’ and to view these factors through ‘motivations, aims and ambitions, personal identity and needs analysis’. Through the selection of an object and the telling of its story individuals are able to capture this foundation and can then build on this by linking it to their organisation and the on-going development of themselves in their leadership role.

Crossan, Mazutis, Sejts, and Gandz, (2013:298) assert the value of using symbols or objects within a development programme as a way for participants to introduce themselves. They suggest selecting a symbol or object that ‘signifies who they are’ helps to explore core concepts of ‘virtue, character strengths, values and so forth’.

Louisa’s story

To help illustrate our activity we share Louisa’s story and her artefact. By way of context, Louisa was an area manager in a multi-national banking institution. She led a team of 14 staff who were all small business managers working across the West Yorkshire region of the UK. The artefacts activity was

used during a week-long residential leadership development programme that the Bank was delivering internally across all of its UK leadership population. Programme participants were asked to bring with them an artefact to share towards the end of the week, amongst a group of 12 peers who had not met one another before the residential week.

When it was Louisa's turn to share her object, she carefully removed it from some bubble wrap revealing a small boat. Louisa explained,

The object I have chosen to bring is this raku boat. I made this boat when I was on a pottery course a couple of years back. Although it looks a bit rough and ready, technically it was quite hard to make. There were several things that could have gone wrong when the boat was fired, it could have exploded, some of the bits that are stuck on will slip, like the wheelhouse, could have dropped off and with raku glazes you never know what the colours will turn out like until you open the kiln. So for me this is quite often what it feels like to be a leader, some things are unknown, things can go wrong, bits can fall off, but it is still worth doing and persevering with because of what you can achieve. I also think the boat has some other similarities, it is capable of being steered across stormy seas, it usually has a captain and a team of people for it to work effectively and it takes you on a journey. Many connections again for me with leadership and teamwork.

As Louisa was telling her story the boat was passed around the circle of other delegates for them to look at it more closely.

Insert image of artefact here

After she has told her story, group members were able to ask questions or comment on what they thought about the artefact, the story and of Louisa. Two comments in particular seemed significant for Louisa as she felt they provided her with new insights into how she operated as a leader. The first was a comment from Chris,

Louisa, your little boat is beautiful, it reminds me of you, the soft blue colours are very calming. You are a very calm person and you have been a steadying influence on all of us this week. I think this must also be the case when you are leading your team of staff.

A second comment came from Debbie,

I really like the detail you have achieved on the boat, the waves you have added to the base of the boat give it real character. You seem very detailed in all that you do, this is a really good quality to have. I wish I could be better at detail!

We can see from this example how the activity works in practice. Louisa has reflected before the course as to which artefact to bring and the story to tell. The artefact is clearly precious and of personal value to her by the care she takes in packing it in protective material to bring it to the course.

She has considered how it connects with her role in the bank and what aspects of the story are most important to her. The group members have been drawn into the story and offer their thoughts on Louisa's leadership qualities based on their experience of her during the programme. As in the quote from Debbie, some participants consider their own leadership skills as well as Louisa's. New insights shared with Louisa encourage her to reflect more deeply after the activity on her leadership identity.

Discussion and findings

We discussed the activity with Louisa after the programme had run and asked her to reflect on some of the outcomes of undertaking the 'artefacts-and-storytelling' process and the comments she received from her peers. Louisa explained that she was curious about the requirement to take an item along to the course, and said, "I wasn't sure what we would be doing or why and which object I should take. I remember thinking about it for quite some time before finally deciding to take the raku pottery boat." Of all the activities she and the others did during that week, "the object activity [sic] was the one that stood out for me. I was intrigued by the objects people had chosen and the stories I heard. In fact, I don't really remember much of the content of the rest of the week!"

However, thinking back on it now, she said that she could "see that the activity provoked me to consider several aspects about myself, my personal values, my leadership style and how my team of staff perform. I have also reflected more on the comments I received when I told my story." These are comments that are in common with those from many participants in this programme.

Personal values. Louisa talked enthusiastically about three aspects in turn and in more detail, starting with her personal values. She said that "my little boat showed me the value of perseverance, perseverance is really important to me." Louisa has had to work hard at many of the things that she wanted from life.

By thinking about her raku boat and the story that came with it, she came to a realisation that some children are naturally bright and do well at school, and get good grades, "by boning up on things the night before. I probably was quite bright and I got reasonable grades but I put a lot of hours in to achieve that." Louisa's parents taught her to work hard and she thinks that it has stood her in good

stead. Of course, she had to work hard when she joined the bank. “I never wanted to just be a cashier, not that there is anything wrong with that, it is an important role, but I wanted to do a managerial role.” She studied in her own time by correspondence to get her Chartered Institute of Bankers qualification, a six-year project. “But,” she said, “I needed that qualification to become a manager.”

For Louisa, even the act of making the raku boat “took perseverance over the week I was at the pottery school, sketching out the idea at the start of the week and then working on different aspects of it each day ready for it to be fired at the end of the week.” Working as part of a team is important to Louisa. She said that, “I am a fairly sociable person and I think I work best when there are a team of us working on something; that was the other thing I associated with the boat, teamwork,” She took over as leader of a team in West Yorkshire following an organisational restructure. Louisa worked hard to take a low-performing team up to a high-performing team. She saw an opportunity and worked hard. She said that,

Some of the people left, we got some new people in, and some people stayed the same. Gradually, as a team we started to work better together and to believe in ourselves more. By the time I left that role, 3 years later, we were ranked as third in the country. I guess we are back to perseverance again because actually getting them to that stage was hard, hard work.

Clearly, Louisa had a leadership role to play in this organisation. It is rewarding with management education like this to see people realise, consciously and unconsciously, the values that are important to them and that drive their leadership behaviour. Perseverance is an important value to Louisa.

Leadership style. The reflections that were started by the artefact of the boat included reflections about the leadership style that Louisa learned to implement. The role discussed above was the first formal leadership role that Louisa had had. She was in her late 20’s and “I was line managing some people who were twice my age. What I quickly realised was that I had to be flexible to get the best out of people.” She found that being quite relaxed about things like being “accommodating with holidays ... start and end times of the working day ... make a big difference to people.” She delegated. “I let them decide how to divvy things up” but it had to be done fairly and openly. Actually, Louisa was not greatly interested in the ins and outs of “school runs and dental appointments.”

But, at other times she was “pretty tough with them. I had to be. Compliance and regulation is a big part of the industry and when I took over some of the procedures and processes were pretty slack.” She highlighted the example of opening new accounts. It is an important part of compliance. Banks can lose their licence “if things are not up to standard.” Internal checks on the process were sloppy. There was little consistency in what was being done. Corners were being cut. She said,

I had a real focus on that. All of my team were re-trained, I implemented a different process for checking and sign-off and I did sampling of accounts every month for over 6 months until I was happy that the system was working and people were following the process. Everyone in the team knew that this was a non-negotiable area for me and we got really good comments when the inspectors came in to do their annual assessment.

Louisa had come to a realisation about her leadership style. She gets the best out of people. She motivates them. She empowers them to make their own decisions. But, “in certain situations I have to be seen to be the boss, apply rules and expect people to respect that.” Louisa worked out for herself that by striking the right balance between her democratic and authoritarian leadership, she would get the best from her workers.

Sense-making. Lastly, on the point of follower sense-making, Louisa reflected on what has resonated with her since the activity took place. She had seen follower sense-making for herself, and she had received direct feedback from them about how they had made sense of the challenges and paradoxes that they faced at work.

Her team in West Yorkshire “had experienced a lot of change in a short space of time with several different leaders. I tried to offer stability, consistency and to settle the situation down.” Two colleagues complimented her on her level of accuracy and detail. When she had to tighten up procedures for opening new accounts, she had to be personally detailed in procedure. Perhaps more importantly, her staff knew why it was important for them to be tight and accurate in their particular tasks. She made sense of the challenge for herself and, even more importantly, she passed on that sense-making to her staff. Louisa summed up this two-dimensional sense-making benefit best when she said,

The activity and thinking it through before and after has given me a better understanding of who I am and how I like to behave, particularly as a leader of a team. I’m not sure if my team noticed a difference when I returned from the course because I didn’t ask them, but I do know that we had

success as a team as a result of some of the things I did and said so I suspect some of it did play a part.

Other benefits emerged from this exercise, but we are concerned herein with leadership identity. Therefore, the benefits that emerged about critical thinking skills, verbal communication and listening skills, presentational skills, and an appreciation of cultural differences, will have to wait for another paper. The main organisational value of this exercise is that the leadership role becomes so much easier when the issues that emerged are laid out before the audience of followers. As a result, all the participants of the programme are the recipients of the management education. Louisa had a clearer perspective of the personal values that drive her leadership. Second, she had a clearer perspective of her leadership identity. Third, the audience (let's call them followers for the sake of the exercise) have a clearer perspective of the leadership style that they are likely to receive from Louisa. As a result, leadership is destined to be more successful. The artefact, and the story-telling that comes with it, are central to the efficacy of this management development process.

CONCLUSION

We suggest that leadership is learned in four ways. First, participants learn leadership from the kinaesthetic experience of feeling and seeing the leadership artefact, and from concurrently hearing the story that is axiomatic of the artefact. The story is about the significance of the artefact, but it is also about how the artefact brings to life the leadership identity of the story-teller. More senses are used than the usual seeing and hearing senses found in leadership development programmes and via language. They see more than a picture of the artefact. They see the actual object, as they feel it and will remember it and the story behind it. There is quite possibly also a 'sixth sense' at play as the listener becomes part of the story, and gives them self a role to play in the leadership story that is unfolding before them. The role of the sixth sense is quite possibly quashed in the more traditional management development programmes which use only the traditional senses to impart understanding.

Second, and following from the first conclusion, participants can imbed themselves within the narrative and take on a role within the leadership story that is provided. Consequently, participants will imagine their own artefact and the leadership metaphor that it represents, as well as the leadership

role that it enacts. As participants are seeing, feeling and hearing (and where plausible, smelling and tasting) the story and artefact at hand, they are thinking about their own personal artefact and story. Don't be surprised if participants learned as much about leadership by thinking ahead to their own artefact, as they did from Louisa's narrative.

Third and fourth, participants can understand leadership identity in two ways. First, they understand better the leadership identity of participants, like Louisa. Second, participants will explore the leadership identity that they might portray to audiences as a result of the artefact and story that they will provide to those audiences in the future. An important characteristic of transformational leadership is about conveying one's values and beliefs. This exercise conveys values and beliefs, as well as much about the person in the leadership role. Some people in leadership roles tell their staff about their values and beliefs. That works only so far. More effective people in leadership roles might tell a story about their life that brings their values and beliefs to life. As you can appreciate, that tactic takes their audience further, but still only so far. However, the most effective people in leadership roles will bring an artefact and tell a story that brings to life their values and beliefs. The real person is laid out before the audience. The audience gets a better sense of the level of humility and sincerity of the speaker. The audience can determine the level of following that they will provide. In addition, members of the audience, soon to be called upon to demonstrate leadership, will be better placed to convey their leadership identity to their new audience.

The use of artefacts and storytelling is a powerful way for us to achieve a greater understanding of our leadership identity and the leadership identity of others. When an artefact becomes, as Hoskins suggests a 'metaphor for self' (1998:198), we have a deeper connection and relationship with the artefact, ourselves and with others. We hope that you, like us, might be inspired to consider what your artefact might be and what it says about you, and to consider using your artefact and its story as a powerful tool in management education programmes.

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Tables, diagrams, figures and images

Image 1: Louisa's artefact

