

Inexperienced Leaders: The Initial Phase of Leadership Expertise

The following observations are designed to provide a basic description of some of the characteristics displayed by inexperienced leaders based on my own experience as a leader and conversations with many leaders at this initial stage of leadership development. As a consideration of the biographies of a wide variety of leaders will show, each leader develops their own unique leadership style depending on their personal history as well as the situations and culture in which they are leading. Moreover, the complex, interactive, nature of the unique knowledge-base that each leader develops makes it very difficult to fully describe the developmental trajectory of any one leader. However, it is hoped that describing the general changes related to the values, ideas and skills that leaders develop, as well as, the developmental increases in self-awareness and self-regulation will be of help to those who are in the process of developing and enhancing their own leadership expertise. It is to a description of those changes that we now turn.

Values

As the knowledge-based model of leadership expertise contends, the values that leaders espouse and act on will play an important role in their performance as a leader (Wall, 1986, 2008). Moreover, the specific values that leaders adopt will have a significant impact on their leadership style and development as leaders. Initially, the personal values that leaders hold will influence their leadership style; with experience and reflection, they become more aware of other basic values underlying their leadership performance. With time and experience, they begin to consciously shape the set of values which reflect their own core values and the values of significant others in their organization.

Several key factors influence the development of values-based leadership. One of the most important factors is the situation in which one is leading. For example, leading in situations that involve individuals or groups that adhere to markedly different values can present significant challenges, especially to new or inexperienced educational leaders. In such situations, it may take some time for leaders to recognize the impact that

such differences have on communication, collaboration and group problem solving.

Again, value conflicts often prompt inexperienced leaders to consider more fully the set of values underlying their leadership. Reflecting on such value-laden situations can be especially valuable if it is coupled with reading some of the basic texts on values-based educational leadership (Barth, 1990; Begley, 1999; Hodgkinson, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1992). Involvement in structured courses or professional development seminars can also help guide the reflection process during the initial phase of leadership development.

Ideas

Leaders develop a set of key ideas that influence the way in which they lead. As noted above, the ideas that shape their leadership performance will be influenced by the values that they hold. Initially leaders develop a relatively sparse set of leadership ideas, which may result in the adoption of unclear “theories in action” (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996) and “mental models” (Senge, 1990, 1994) that influence their leadership performance. The application of these relatively incomplete models can limit the effectiveness of leaders as they may not understand the important role that communication, teamwork, decision-making and problem-solving play in the leadership process (Covey, 1990; Katzenbach & Smith, 1999; Goleman, 1998; Hackman, 2002; Hartley, 1997).

With experience, reading, reflection, and discussion, inexperienced leaders gain a greater conceptual understanding of why and how they are leading, which can result in more effective leadership performance. For example, reading classic texts on leadership can influence the development of their knowledge base (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1990; McGregor, 1960). In addition, discussing leadership issues in formal and informal conversations can greatly enhance their leadership knowledge. In future postings, I will share some of the key ideas that I have found to be important for inexperienced leaders to consider.

Skills

As noted above, the values and ideas that leaders hold have a significant impact on the leadership skills that they will use. Given that it takes time to develop a skill, it is not surprising to find that inexperienced leaders have acquired a relatively small repertoire of such skills. In addition to the fact that they have a limited set of leadership skills, the fact that they are in the process of acquiring new ones often results in the unsuccessful application and use of these skills, which in turn may result in “dips of performance”. New leaders and those who are working with them need to understand that developing leadership expertise takes time, deliberate practice, and supportive feedback. Hence, inexperienced leaders should be given the support they require to develop as leaders.

In future posts, some of the essential skills that I contend leaders should consider learning will be presented.

Self-awareness:

Values, ideas and skills form the interactive knowledge- base that leaders develop. Each leader develops a unique set of ideas and skills that are congruent, at least to some extent, with their personal and professional values. Glaser (1980), Goleman (1998) and Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely (2007) have noted that as leaders acquire an increasing amount of expertise, they become more fully aware of their leadership style and the specific skills that they routinely use as leaders. Most importantly, they begin to recognize that the leadership skills they use will often stem from the values and ideas that they have adopted.

As would be expected, initially inexperienced leaders spend a relatively limited amount of time reflecting on their own performance. However, based on the results of informal and formal learning opportunities, they become increasingly aware of the importance and value of taking the time to reflect on how they are actually leading (Schon, 1983, 1987). As noted earlier, the practice of keeping a journal or reflecting on particular leadership experiences can enhance the degree of self-awareness that leaders develop. In future postings, several strategies will be shared to facilitate this reflective process.

Self-regulation:

The development of leadership expertise involves practice, feedback, reflection, and learning. A number of metacognitive strategies are involved in the leadership development process. As Glaser (1980) so clearly pointed out, as leaders gain experience, they begin to take an increasing amount of control over their own learning. An important aspect of this expression of personal agency involves taking the time to evaluate their leadership strengths and areas that might need to be improved. Moreover, as they attempt to acquire new skills, they begin to understand and appropriately apply suitable learning strategies as they move through the awareness, attempting, acquiring, and adapting phases of this skill learning process.

In addition to the above self-regulatory strategies related to skill learning and reflection, inexperienced leaders learn to apply a variety of time management skills to ensure that they and their colleagues reach the goals they have identified while maintaining a balanced lifestyle.

In summary, during the inexperienced phase of leadership development, based on their experience, feedback and reflection, leaders acquire a deeper appreciation of their basic values, the key ideas underlying their leadership style, as well as, a repertoire of essential leadership skills. In doing so, they become more aware of their leadership knowledge-base and learn to more effectively control their performance and learning.

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