Organizational Dynamics (2012) 41, 146–154

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SciVerse ScienceDirect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn

Developing as a leader: The power of mindful engagement

Susan J. Ashford, D. Scott DeRue

Organizations around the world are faced with a multitude of economic, social, ethical, and geo-political challenges. The uncertainty of the current economic crisis is limiting growth and innovation across market sectors. The globalization of international trade has created more complex and interdependent flows of people, goods, funds, and technology across national boundaries. More people than not lack access to quality education, employment, healthcare, and clean water. War is a current reality for over one-third of the world. At a time when the status quo is unsustainable and a "new normal" is required, the need for exceptional leadership at all levels of organizations has never been greater. Leadership enables organizations to see opportunities on the horizon, develop structures to motivate action, and inspire people of all stripes to pursue opportunities with courage, passion and resilience.

Despite an immense need for exceptional leadership, there is a leadership talent crisis brewing that spans national boundaries and market sectors. World-wide surveys of senior executives and human resource professionals indicate that up to 70% of North American employers experience a dearth of leadership talent that is and will continue to impede organizational performance. In Asia, the problem is even worse, with 88% of organizations indicating concern about a looming shortage of leadership talent. Market sectors such as non-profit and social enterprise are experiencing leadership deficits that significantly constrain their ability to meet the needs of their constituencies. Unfortunately, as the baby boomer population retires, this talent shortage will escalate even further, as organizations are projected to lose up to 50% of their senior leadership personnel. Indeed, the need for leadership is real and surpasses organizations' current ability to develop leadership talent.

ORIGIN OF THE LEADERSHIP TALENT CRISIS

The leadership talent crisis is emerging despite organizations devoting considerable resources to leadership development. In 2010, U.S.-based organizations invested $12 billion in leadership development programs and activities, and as the global economy begins to recover, these investments are expected to increase. The origin of the problem is not a lack of investment in leadership development. We submit that the leadership deficit originates from two fundamental assumptions that organizations make about leadership and leadership development.

First, organizations and their members routinely confuse the term "leader" with people who hold a supervisory position or leader-like job title. However, leadership is about influencing people and processes in service of accomplishing a collective aim or group goal. Such influence can be performed by any member of a group, division, or organization. It is also true that people who are formally charged with supervisory responsibilities sometimes (some would say often) fail to exhibit effective leadership. This depiction of leadership is consistent with our colleague Bob Quinn's notion that leadership is a fundamental state that individuals can enter and exit. When they are in the state, they are focused on collective needs and goals (as opposed to personal comfort) and intent on influencing the collective towards creating particular results that benefit the whole. This sense of leadership is also consistent with a growing chorus of academics and practitioners interested in understanding the leadership potential of people at *all* levels of organizations, whether they formally hold supervisory roles or not.

The second limiting assumption is that leadership development is the responsibility of organizations, not individuals. Indeed, current best practices focus on how organizations design and deploy effective leadership development programs and experiences, and organizations such as General Electric Co. (GE) and IBM are routinely ranked and praised based on their ability to develop systems and structures that cultivate leadership talent. Likewise, senior managers are often portrayed as responsible for identifying and nurturing high-potential, leadership talent. Yet, nowhere in this

0090-2616/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.orgdyn.2012.01.008

equation is the individual's responsibility for taking ownership over his or her own development as a leader. To illustrate, consider the fact that leadership development programs customarily teach leadership concepts and skills, but rarely do development programs teach individuals how to learn leadership — which is ironic considering that over 70% of leadership development occurs as people go through the ups and downs of challenging, developmental experiences on the job. We contend that the return on investment in leadership development would be much greater if organizations invested in developing individuals' skills related to the learning of leadership from lived experiences, as opposed to simply teaching leadership concepts, frameworks, and skills.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: A POS APPROACH

Positive organizational scholarship (POS), with its emphasis on human strengths, capabilities, and agency, offers a novel way of thinking about leadership development that is free of these limiting assumptions. A POS perspective on leadership development suggests that if organizations are to prosper in environments characterized by growing uncertainty and rapid change, they need to enable people across all levels of the organization to not only have the skills to lead effectively, but also see themselves as leaders and be seen by others as leaders. Indeed, thinking about leadership as an identity or state of mind that anyone can enter into appropriately separates leadership from formal supervision, and permits leadership to emerge at all levels of organizations. Thus, a positive identity as a leader might just be the key to unlocking the leadership potential of people who are not designated as formal leaders, and enabling these people to step up and take on leadership roles when the need for leadership arises.

A POS perspective on leadership development also suggests that people can develop the courage, fortitude, and skill set necessary for taking responsibility for their own leadership development, and more important, that the learning and development that occurs might be greater when they do. This emphasis on personal agency in the leadership development process fits well with the contemporary labor market. The idea that individuals must wait to be noticed and deemed worthy of development — for example, to be selected for a formal, high-potential program where they gain access to unique developmental opportunities — is an antiquated point of view. In the current labor market, people no longer stay in one organization for their careers and as such, they have a motive to develop themselves as leaders. The identity of "leader" is such a positively-valued one within most organizations that being seen as an effective leader enhances individuals' career mobility both within and beyond their current organization. For these reasons, people need to be proactive with respect to their own development. They need to take responsibility for their own development by learning how to learn leadership from their own lived experiences.

In this article, we first describe how individuals, through their actions and interactions with other people, develop a positive identity as a leader. Leader identity is both a precursor to and motivator of leadership development. A methodology for how individuals can take advantage of the most powerful source of leadership development there is — their own lived experiences — is detailed. Following Morgan McCall's groundbreaking research on first-hand, lived experiences as an influential "teacher" of leadership, scholars have articulated the strategies and tactics that organizations can use to leverage the power of experience in leadership development. Although we fully endorse the important role organizations play in creating developmental experiences and supporting the learning process, our emphasis is different. Grounded in POS themes of human agency and potential, we present a methodology — called mindful engagement — that moves individuals from passively waiting and hoping to be "developed" to active learners and architects of their own leadership development. The mindful engagement process explains how individuals can approach, engage in, and reflect on their lived experiences in ways that promote learning and increase the developmental punch of any experience.

Compared to traditional perspectives on leadership development, our focus on developing a positive leader identity and mindfully engaging in developmental experiences has several advantages. First, we portray leadership development as a process that is available to anyone and that can take place at all levels of organizations. This perspective invites more people into the leadership development process, and as a result, should help organizations address the current leadership talent deficit. Second, our perspective emphasizes that leadership development is not something that starts and stops according to an organization's agenda — for example, when the organization decides an individual is ready for a particular training program or developmental assignment. Rather, leadership development is an ongoing process where individuals take initiative and, through their own agency and action, capitalize on the developmental value of the full range of life experiences. Finally, organizations can leverage our model and research to complement their existing leadership development methods and approaches by creating conditions that encourage individuals to actively take part in and enhance the value of leadership development experiences.

DISCOVERING THE LEADER WITHIN

As human beings, we can envision many different possible selves for who we are and the roles that we play in society. These might include possible selves that we feel we ought to be, selves that we ideally want to be, or selves that we barely dare to dream about being. Our identity, or how we think of ourselves, is comprised of these possible selves and the actual roles we play and ways we are. For example, one's identity might include roles such as "father" or "mentor", attributes such as "intellectual" or "loyal friend," or social groups that we see ourselves belonging to such as "women" or "racial minority." These identities become key sources of motivation and strongly influence our attitudes, ways of thinking, and behavior.

Our research suggests that seeing oneself as a leader or having "leader" as a core part of one's identity, is an important precursor to taking on leadership roles and engaging in actions to further develop one's capacity for effective

leadership. People who see themselves as leaders, or at least see leader as a possible self, are more likely to seek out opportunities to exhibit leadership as well as further develop their leadership capabilities. Thus, a fundamental question is why some people come to see themselves as leaders, or envision leader as a possible self, and other people do not. How do people discover the possible leader within them?

The definition of leadership, the actions that are characterized as leadership, and who is (or is not) a leader are somewhat ambiguous and subject to personal interpretation. Although the formal title or position that one holds certainly has meaning with respect to leadership, we all know people who hold lofty job titles but are not seen as leaders by members of their organization. In contrast, companies such as General Electric and Procter & Gamble, two companies that top the Hay Group's list of the best companies for leadership, have embraced an "everyone as leader" mantra. The expectation is that everyone at every level will develop and exercise leadership. Indeed, in our own lives, we can all identify people who do not hold formal positions of power and supervision, but are seen as effective leaders within their organization. The identity of leader is, in fact, socially constructed. It is a product of how people perceive, act towards, and react to others — or what we refer to as the claiming and granting of a leadership identity.

People can claim a leader identity in a variety of ways. For instance, a highly visible and direct claim of leadership would be publicly referring to oneself as the leader of a particular team or group or engaging in stereotypical leadership acts. In contrast, individuals can also engage in less visible and more indirect claims of leadership by, for example, sitting at the head of a meeting table, setting the agenda for a meeting, drawing attention to their personal connection with other recognized leaders, or even "looking the part" by orchestrating their dress in ways that elicit perceptions of power and status. After all, there is a reason that male political figures and senior executives are often dressed in dark suits and red ties at important functions — because research suggests that this particular attire is associated with power and leadership.

A claim of leadership by itself does not result in a leader identity. A leader identity must be granted by others for it to be internalized, recognized and endorsed by other individuals and the organization more broadly. Grants of a leader identity can either follow claims for leadership or precede them. For example, a person may not see him or herself as a leader, but because other people begin looking to this person for leadership, referring to him or her as a leader, or appointing him or her to leader-like positions, this person over time comes to see "leader" as part of his or her identity. Indeed, grants of leadership can be highly visible and direct (e.g., electing someone to a leader-like position) or quite subtle (e.g., complying with a person's influence attempt). Over time, as individuals receive more grants of leadership and begin to engage in claims of leadership that are responded to with subsequent grants, they come to see "leader" as part of who they are. It is through this claiming-granting process that people come to see themselves and be seen by others as leaders within organizations. In this way, claiming and granting are the basis for discovering the leader within.

To illustrate, consider Colonel James Moschgat's story of William "Bill" Crawford, as told in an essay titled "A Janitor's Ten Lessons in Leadership." Mr. Crawford was a quiet, unassuming figure at the U.S. Air Force Academy, an afterthought to most cadets. As one student said: "The Academy, one of our nation's premier leadership laboratories, kept us busy from dawn till dusk. And Mr. Crawford. . .well, he was just a janitor." By chance, one of the students discovered that Mr. Crawford had earned the Medal of Honor during World War II, the highest honor a solider can earn. Almost immediately, the students began to grant Mr. Crawford a leader identity by treating him with more respect, inviting him to formal Academy functions, and interacting with him as a respected member of the U.S. Air Force and their team. In response to these identity grants, Mr. Crawford began to dress in a conservative dark suit, talk to and interact with the cadets, and carry himself with greater purpose and dignity. As one cadet noted: "I think we became Bill's cadets and his squadron." In our language, he became socially constructed as a leader.

Helping people understand the socially constructed nature of leadership and the subtle ways in which they can claim and be granted a leader identity offers a more grassroots, bottoms-up approach to addressing the leadership talent deficit. For example, it enhances individuals' confidence to engage in leadership by enabling them to see and interpret their lived experiences — ranging from micro-moments of interaction with others to highly public forms of promotion and recognition — as identity grants as opposed to coincidence or the product of some external factor. Likewise, helping people recognize the full range of ways in which they can effectively claim a leader identity enables people to step up as leaders in situations where leadership is needed. Claims of leadership that are affirmed by grants begin to substantiate the leader identity as "true of oneself," and in turn, the number of people who see themselves and are seen by others as leaders grows. At this point, a virtuous cycle begins to emerge. As people begin to internalize a leader identity, they begin to see opportunities to engage in leadership and develop new leadership capabilities that they might not have seen previously. This intervention, in turn, creates additional opportunities for claiming and granting and further reinforces the development of a leader identity.

A fundamental component of this identity-based model of leadership development is that people are able to recognize, process, and learn from their experiences. Indeed, fully comprehending and appreciating the subtleties of the claiming-granting process requires that individuals be highly mindful of their lived experiences as they live them. Unfortunately, this level of mindfulness is rare and doesn't occur without effort. We now turn our attention to a model of mindful engagement, which underscores the skills, practices, and habits that enable individuals to mindfully engage in and learn leadership from their lived experiences.

MINDFUL ENGAGEMENT: LEARNING TO LEARN FROM LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

Experience is a funny thing. We widely recognize that leadership primarily is learned from experience. However, people do not automatically learn from experience. A particular experience can have all of the ingredients for leadership development — novelty, high-stakes responsibilities, change, interpersonal and cultural diversity, complex organizational

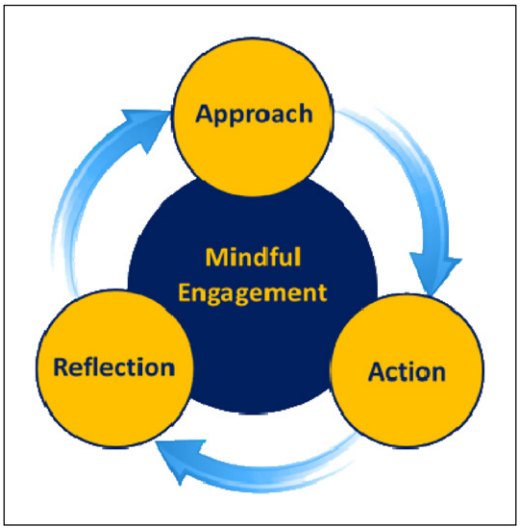

Figure 1 The Mindful Engagement Process.

boundaries — but still the person can come away from the experience with no lessons learned or even the wrong lessons. In this way, two people going through the exact same experience may learn different amounts, or fundamentally different lessons about themselves and leadership. To maximize the developmental value of any experience, individuals must approach and go through their experiences mindfully. Mindfulness is a "state of being" where people are actively aware of themselves and their surroundings, open to new information, and willing and able to process their experience from multiple perspectives. As illustrated in Fig. 1, mindful engagement describes a process for how individuals can approach their experiences, go through their experiences, and reflect on their experiences in ways that enhance the lessons of experience.

Approach: Developing a Learning Mindset

Talented, successful people are often their own worst enemies when it comes to learning from experience. They know what works, because it has worked in the past. Combine this with a business environment that over-emphasizes execution and short-term performance metrics, and the result is a serious challenge to developing leadership insights. It begins with how people approach situations. Rather than focusing on what can be learned from a particular experience, people all too often focus on either avoiding failure or proving to others that they can meet performance expectations. Yet, learning sometimes requires failure and mistakes. This often involves individuals engaging in experiences where they do not yet have the skills to perform effectively. Likewise, individuals routinely set or have set for them specific and challenging goals that specify what is (and is not) successful performance. However, rarely do individuals set goals related to what they will learn from a particular experience. Our model of mindful engagement emphasizes the importance of approaching experiences with a learning orientation, as opposed to a focus on proving competence or avoiding failure, as well as having clear goals related to learning and leadership development.

Learning orientation

A learning orientation describes an approach to experiences where individuals are focused on acquiring new knowledge or skills, or attaining a deeper understanding of the particular task or subject. A learning orientation is associated with increased motivation to learn, the ability to maintain that motivation following initial failure or setbacks, and greater learning from experience. A performance orientation driven by a desire to prove oneself enjoys many of the same benefits as a learning orientation, such as increased motivation and feedback-seeking behavior, but research suggests that unless this desire to prove oneself in a performance situation is accompanied by a learning orientation, the lessons of experience are either reduced or missed entirely. An even more serious threat to learning from experience is a person having a sole focus on avoiding mistakes or failures. An avoidance orientation promotes dysfunctional behaviors and emotional states, such as less feedback seeking and higher anxiety, which ultimately can render experiences fruitless in terms of learning and development.

Although some people are innately disposed to approach experiences with more or less of a learning orientation, organizations can design, frame and introduce experiences in ways that are more likely to induce a learning orientation among their emerging leadership talent. In mindful engagement workshops with teams preparing to engage in complex, action-learning projects, we expose participants to the benefits of a learning orientation and have them publicly commit to actions that they will engage in during the project to cultivate and reinforce a learning orientation for themselves and other team members. Our research suggests that not only does this learning orientation enhance the learning that occurs from developmental experiences, but with it individuals are also able to take on more challenging assignments without becoming cognitively or emotionally overwhelmed.

Learning goals

Beyond the importance of approaching developmental experiences with a learning orientation, our mindful engagement model also emphasizes the importance of setting explicit goals for learning and leadership development. We know from long-standing research traditions that goal setting is vital for driving performance results. Research has also established the importance of setting learning goals for complex, challenging tasks where individuals might not have the requisite knowledge and skills to perform effectively. In our mindful engagement workshops, examples of leadership development goals that appear include "learning how to set an effective vision or direction for a group," "learning to be more persuasive," and "learning how to share more of my authentic self." One benefit of these learning goals, especially in complex, challenging environments, is that they direct individuals' attention from simply performing the task to what new knowledge or skills need to be developed to exhibit effective leadership both in the current task and beyond. In addition, relative to a general intention of "developing my leadership," specific learning goals compel individuals to assess and articulate their key developmental needs with respect to leadership. Identification of these developmental needs not only creates greater self-awareness, but also enables individuals to share their learning objectives

with others. In turn, this step enhances accountability and creates opportunities for collaborative learning.

Action: Engaging in Learning Behaviors

Through experience, individuals can learn what it means to lead in a particular organizational context, what forms of leadership are more or less effective, their dominant styles of leadership, and their strengths and weaknesses related to leadership. To learn from experience, however, individuals must balance two distinct yet complementary endeavors: they must perform the task at hand while simultaneously engaging in actions that facilitate the learning and development process. Our research suggests that people need to engage in three practices during their experiences to foster real-time learning from experience: active experimentation, feedback seeking, and emotion regulation. Importantly, these practices rely and build on the foundation established by adopting a learning orientation and setting specific, learning goals in the approach phase.

Active experimentation

Active experimentation involves engaging in actions designed to ''try out'' what the person is attempting to learn, in this case leadership. As Aristotle once said: ''One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try''. Active experimentation is a core tenet of most experiential learning theories, dating back to the work of John Dewey and more recent work by David Kolb. Active experimentation might include trying out what seemed to work effectively in a past situation and then drawing lessons about why it worked or did not work in this new situation. Alternatively, a person could design mini-experiments to test the effectiveness of a particular course of action in a given situation.

Although some people naturally engage in more active experimentation than others, our research suggests that active experimentation is a behavior that everyone can engage in to enhance learning from experience. In our mindful engagement workshops, we guide people to set a learning goal and then explore and commit to a couple of experiments they will engage in during their upcoming project work. These experiments are directly linked to that person's learning goals. For example, when people want to learn how to become more persuasive in group settings, they might design experiments where they play with the timing of their influence attempts, the passion with which they speak or the succinctness of their message. Leadership development requires change, and the practice of active experimentation enables individuals to test the impact of changes in behavior, thought, and attitude. As individuals learn from their experiments, they can make further adjustments as they go forward.

Feedback seeking

A key part of experimenting with new behaviors is assessing their impact on others. With this information, some behaviors are dropped as ineffective and others are retained as part of a successful behavioral repertoire. To gain this information, it is important to engage in a second practice during action: feedback seeking. To the extent people are able to solicit feedback from others regarding their leadership and its effectiveness in a given situation, their experiments with new and different forms of leadership will be more targeted and better informed.

Because people often worry about hurting others' feelings, creating tension or conflict in groups, or coming across as overly judgmental, people often do not share important feedback with others. As a result, individuals are left in the dark regarding how their leadership impacts people and situations unless they actively seek out and solicit feedback from others. Active requests for feedback enable those who might have otherwise been reluctant to share their input, putting them in the role of responding to an initiation from someone else. If the feedback request is coded as sincere, this role leaves people more comfortable giving candid feedback. People who seek feedback not only receive more feedback, but they also receive more helpful feedback about themselves and their leadership relative to people who simply wait for others to give them feedback. Indeed, our research documents that people who seek feedback have a more accurate view of how they are perceived by others.

There is also an added bonus from feedback seeking. It creates a positive impression and enables more creativity. Across several of our studies, feedback seekers were more highly regarded than those who did not solicit feedback, especially if those seekers solicited feedback on how their performance was ineffective. Also, feedback seeking from a broad array of people enhanced individuals' creativity at work.

If feedback seeking helps individuals learn more, be more creative, and be perceived as more responsive and caring, why is it that individuals do not engage in feedback seeking more often? One clear answer from our research is that people are often afraid of hearing the message. To protect their egos they avoid feedback altogether. In addition, people are often anxious about how the act of asking for feedback will be perceived by others, for example whether they will seem weak, flawed, or dependent on others if they seek feedback. To protect their image, they do not ask for input. Despite our research showing that these concerns are unfounded — in fact, seeking feedback has a positive impact on one's image regardless of what the feedback actually is — they persist nonetheless. Indeed, the primacy of these concerns reinforces the importance of learning goals and developing a learning orientation as a precursor to engaging in challenging, developmental experiences. Without establishing a learning mindset, individuals will certainly fall prey to these fears and anxieties. This final point brings us to our third, action-oriented practice of mindful engagement, which is regulating both positive and negative emotions that can interfere with the leadership development process.

Emotion regulation

Work life is an emotional experience. At work, people experience emotions ranging from fear, joy, anger, pride, guilt, and excitement that influence not only how they process and interpret their current experiences, but also how they approach and engage in future experiences. In terms of learning and leadership development, research depicts a complex relationship between emotions and learning. On the one hand, positive emotions such as feeling grateful or appreciative can enhance learning, but when people feel overly positive about their situation or experience, they can

also become complacent and less focused on developing new capabilities to enhance performance. Likewise, negative emotions such as frustration over a performance failure or frustration over an ambiguity can lead individuals to search for cause-and-effect and develop solutions to improve future performance. However, when individuals experience more extreme negative emotions such as anxiety or anger, their attention is focused not on learning from experience but on how the experience threatens their identity and self-esteem. Similarly, in groups with an overly negative tone, people become discouraged and are afraid to voice concerns for fear of being criticized. However, when the tone becomes too positive, people become afraid to raise issues for fear of upsetting the positive feeling within the group.

Given that extreme emotions, positive or negative, can interfere with learning, individuals who can regulate their emotions rather than allowing their emotional states to become overly positive or negative are generally more effective at learning from experience. In leadership development experiences, the ability to regulate emotions will be exceptionally important. Not only are such experiences often perceived as growth opportunities that can elicit extreme anticipation and enthusiasm, they are also challenging in ways that engender uncertainty and anxiety.

Emotion regulation is not easy. It requires a high level of self-awareness and an ability to recognize and control one's thoughts and feelings. Drawing from research on emotion regulation and learning, we have identified several strategies that enable people to regulate their emotions more effectively. First, regular "booster shots" that reinforce a learning mindset — for example, revisiting and recommitting to one's learning goals and experiments — help people stay focused on learning, remind people that mistakes are not failures but rather opportunities to learn, and reinforce the value of active experimentation. Second, creating opportunities for feedback on individuals' display of emotions and/or their emotional intelligence in working with others will help create a self-awareness of their emotions and the impact of those emotions on others and their work. Finally, constructing opportunities for people to discuss their emotions off-line and outside of the immediate work context can help people understand the basis of their own and others' emotions and to put those emotions in perspective. In our workshops and research on mindful engagement, we have found that these strategies enable individuals to regulate their emotions effectively, and as a result, have a more impactful leadership development experience.

Reflection: Looking Back to Learn for the Future

Reflection is quite possibly a manager's least favorite activity. With an orientation toward achievement and performance, many managers aspire to move forward, onward and upward! As Ghoshal and Bruch describe in their 2004 description of executive life in *Harvard Business Review*, "They rush from meeting to meeting, check their e-mail constantly, extinguish fire after fire, and make countless phone calls." Yet, reflection is an essential ingredient in the process of mindful engagement and learning from experience. As T.S. Eliot wrote in one of his poems: "We had the experience but missed the meaning." Alinsky, in his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*, described most people as going "...through life undergoing a series of happenings which pass through their systems undigested. Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on..." To truly learn from experience, people need to take what is happening to them and digest it ("what just happened?"), reflect on it ("why did it go that way?"), and relate it to general patterns of cause-and-effect ("every time I attempt to lead using this approach, people don't follow my lead"). Thus, for people to learn leadership via experience, they must first truly *have* experiences — and this requires reflection.

Reflection is an active process of probing cause-and-effect, questioning assumptions, and analyzing the meaning of experiences. Understanding *what* happened is insufficient. One must appreciate *why* it happened, and *how* the current situation is similar to and different from other situations. The goal of reflection is to understand why a particular situation was successful or unsuccessful, how one's own behaviors and attributes contributed, and how the behavior of others impacted the process and outcome. The U.S. military demonstrates a high level of commitment to reflection. After every important event, large or small, military teams engage in a practice called an "after-action review." These after-action reviews focus on a few critical issues (instead of more amorphously ruminating about the experience), are timed close to the action (instead of at the very end of an entire project or at the end of the year), follow a structured process, and conclude with explicit and specific implications for action (i.e., specify action steps and changes based on the reflection that can be implemented rapidly). These after-action reviews are completed for both successes and failures because the goal is not only to identify the causes of failure but also the conditions that enabled success.

The structured process of reflection involves several steps. First, individuals are encouraged to create an accurate picture of the experience they just completed. Capturing what really occurred, as say a video camera would record, helps people identify and separate out the biases that preclude an accurate reconstruction of experience. Then individuals are encouraged to engage in "counterfactual thinking." This process involves considering "what if," in other words, the actions not taken in the situation and some speculation on what the results might have been had those actions been taken. Finally, reflection involves some distillation of lessons learned, in particular identifying new insights about effective leadership and identifying how these insights can be applied to improve performance in future situations.

Our research suggests a direct and more immediate payoff for leveraging after-action reviews for leadership development. We asked one set of M.B.A. students engaging in four distinct leadership-development experiences over 8 months to engage in an after-action review following each experience. Another group of M.B.A.s went through the same set of developmental experiences and also engaged in reflection, but these students did not utilize a structured, after-action review protocol. Relative to the "general reflection" group, the group of students who engaged in after-action reviews benefited from an 8% increase in leadership effectiveness ratings, a 9% increase in job offers, and a 10% increase in starting salaries. Reflection pays off, and it is something that all people can do, but reflection is also an

Table 1 Process of Mindful Engagement.

Phases	Purpose	Critical Activities
Approach	Commit to a learning mindset	• Embrace a learning orientation • Set learning goals • Plan possible experiments
Action	Create and capitalize on learning opportunities	• Active experimentation • Feedback seeking • Emotion regulation
Reflection	Capture the lessons of experience	• Diagnose cause-and-effect and reconstruct actual experience • Consider counterfactuals • Distill lessons learned

action that requires a structured process, commitment, and discipline. Table 1 summarizes the key steps in the mindful engagement process.

MAKING MINDFUL ENGAGEMENT HAPPEN

Warning: organizations can invest an enormous amount of resources to provide emerging leadership talent with rich developmental experiences, but it is how the individuals approach, go through and reflect on their experiences that ultimately determines the return on investment. Opportunity: Individuals working in contexts that do not emphasize leadership development can enhance their own development by engaging in their experiences mindfully. The practices of mindful engagement are easy to describe and they are easy to prescribe, but they are not always easy to do. Like losing weight or changing one's diet, the benefits of learning and development are often not immediate and many people have a hard time maintaining their learning mindset, their practice of experimentation and feedback seeking, and their commitment to active and structured reflection.

In our work with students and managers, we not only introduce the power of mindful engagement, but we also set up a systematic process that reinforces its use. For example, we first have people work with peer coaches to identify two to three specific learning goals. We also have them talk about the role of mistakes and how they plan to use mistakes for the purpose of learning and development. This step helps build a learning mindset by having students and managers make public their intention and focus on learning. Then, after they identify possible experiments to help them meet their learning goals, they discuss these experiments with their coach and commit to one or two experiments to try. They also discuss how the coach can help keep the individual accountable for attempting these experiments. We also mandate the use of a peer feedback tool during the developmental experience. If the audience is our students, for example, they use a peer feedback tool we developed that allows them to solicit anonymous feedback from people they work with. The feedback is then summarized and presented to each student, followed by conversations about the meaning and implications of the feedback for future action and performance. Finally, we routinely reconvene the groups we work with during and at the end of key developmental experiences to facilitate a process of structured reflection using an after-action protocol that we developed for leadership development purposes. This reflection protocol facilitates a rich discussion among group members and stimulates them to derive learning and action implications related to their leadership development.

To mine the power of mindful engagement, similar structures can be established for individuals and work groups prior to beginning key developmental assignments and at critical transition points during assignments. For example, consider leadership development rotation programs. Many organizations assign emerging leadership talent to rotation programs that cycle individuals through various areas of the organization across several years. A mindful engagement program could be created to enhance the developmental punch of these programs. Prior to beginning the program, each individual could be prompted to set specific learning goals, establish a learning orientation, and identify experiments that they will try during their rotation. Then, during each rotation, the new managers could be prompted to engage in their experiments and seek feedback on their behaviors. At the end of a rotation, managers could be brought together once again to assess and reflect critically on their experiences, share lessons learned, and identify key action implications for their next rotation. As a result, each rotation would build on lessons learned in the prior rotation, and the learning goals and experiments would evolve as the developmental needs of the individual evolve. If this mindful engagement process were repeated before and after each rotation, not only would the learning value of rotation programs increase, but each individual would develop a set of skills and habits that enable greater learning from experience once the rotation program is complete. Similar mindful engagement processes could be established for a range of developmental experiences, including when managers take on expatriate assignments or make significant role transitions in their careers. In this sense, a mindful engagement intervention becomes a gift that keeps on giving. Individuals engaging in it continue to learn over time, grow to see themselves as leaders, and invest even more in their leadership development. Organizations could also assign emerging leaders mentors who are familiar with the steps of mindful engagement, and these mentors could guide key talent through the process and help hold them accountable. Finally, socialization programs for organizational newcomers could reinforce the value of mindful engagement, creating over time a set of habits that reinforce its use in a wide

variety of settings and for various experiences. For example, at Amazon.com, newcomers are quickly exposed to a principle called *Bias for Action*, which is culture-speak for encouraging people to actively experiment and realize that the cost of not taking action is often greater than the cost of making and learning from mistakes.

CONCLUSIONS

By taking responsibility and learning from their experiences, individuals engage in what we might call "everyday leadership development." From this perspective, it is no longer just the highly visible, organizationally sponsored formal programs that teach leadership; rather it is what each of us can do every day to learn more from our experiences. In this view, the key to the world's growing leadership crisis is more action on the part of individuals, not organizations. The more individuals mindfully gauge their experiences, the more leadership is developed. The more organizations support that engagement, the more they will enjoy the fruits of more leadership in more places. Betting on individuals as the answer tends to make one's palm sweat, but then again, individuals who rise to the occasion also take one's breath away.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

To learn more about leadership as an identity, see recent theoretical work by D. S. DeRue and S. J. Ashford, "Who Will Lead and Who Will Follow? A Social Process of Leadership Identity Construction in Organizations," *Academy of Management Review*, 2010, 35, 627—647. Also refer to H. Markus and P. Nurius, "Possible Selves," *American Psychologist*, 1986, 41, 954—969 for more on the foundation of possible selves.

For a discussion of the downsides of equating "leader" with "supervisor," see: J. A. Raelin, "Don't Bother Putting Leadership into People," *Academy of Management Executive*, 2004, 18, 131—135. For a related discussion of leadership as a fundamental state, see R. Quinn, "Moments of Greatness: Entering the Fundamental State of Leadership." *Harvard Business Review*, 1 July 2005, 1—11.

For a POS perspective on leadership development, see: D. S. DeRue and K. M. Workman, "Toward a Positive and Dynamic Theory of Leadership Development," In K. Cameron and G. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 784—798.

Research on learning goal orientation is summarized in a meta-analysis of 178 studies: S. C. Payne, S. S. Youngcourt, and J. Beaubien, "A Meta-Analytic Examination of the Goal Orientation Nomological Net," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2007, 92, 128—150.

Those interested in feedback seeking might read Ashford's and colleagues' review of the literature: S. J. Ashford, R. Blatt, and D. VandeWalle, "Reflections on the Looking Glass: A Review of Research on Feedback-Seeking Behavior in Organizations," *Journal of Management*, 2003, 29, 773—799. For a study linking feedback seeking to creativity, see: K. M. DeStobbeleir, S. J. Ashford, and D. Buyens, "Self-Regulation of Creativity at Work: The Role of Feedback Seeking Behavior in Creative Performance," *Academy of Management Journal*, 2011, 54, 811—832.

For research on the power of reflection, see: F. Anseel, F. Lievens, and E. Schollaert, "Reflection As a Strategy to Enhance Task Performance After Feedback," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 2009, 110, 23—35. Also see S. Ellis and I. Davidi's study of after-event reviews: "After-Event Reviews: Drawing Lessons from Successful and Failed Experience," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2005, 90, 857—871. Baird and colleagues also discuss after-event reviews: L. Baird, P. Holland, and S. Deacon, "Learning from Action: Imbedding more Learning into the Performance Fast Enough to Make a Difference," *Organizational Dynamics*, 1999, 27, 19—32.

Interested readers might want to peruse David Kolb's original work on experiential learning to understand the various learning styles relevant to learning from experience: D. A. Kolb (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984). For application of experiential learning theory to leadership development, see work by J. M. McCall and colleagues: McCall, M. M. Lombardo, and A. M. Morrison, *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988). Also see recent work by D. S. DeRue and N. Wellman: "Developing Leaders Via Experience: The Role of Developmental Challenge, Learning Orientation, and Feedback Availability," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009, 94(4), 859—875. For an articulation of the challenges of learning from experience, see: Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971) and S. Goshal and H. Bruch, "Reclaim Your Job," *Harvard Business Review*, 2004, 82(3), 41—45.

To view the 2010—2011 rankings for excellence in leadership development, click on the following link: http://www.leaderexcel. com/best_ranking.html. To view the Hay Group's "Best Companies for Leadership Study" report, use the following link: http://www.haygroup.com/BestCompaniesForLeadership/

Susan J. Ashford is the Michael & Susan Jandernoa Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Michigan's Stephen M. Ross School of Business and the academic director of the school's executive M.B.A. program. Ashford's research, teaching, and consulting focus is on personal effectiveness in organizations, individual proactivity, leadership and leadership development (e-mail: sja@umich.edu).

D. Scott DeRue is the Bank One Corporation Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Michigan's Stephen M. Ross School of Business. He conducts research and teaches in the areas of leadership and team development, with a particular focus on how leaders and teams learn, adapt, and develop in complex and dynamic environments (e-mail: dsderue@umich.edu).