

Becoming a leader – a matter of education?

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Introduction

Any organization – no matter whether in the private, public or third sector – needs to have a strategy to ensure an effective pipeline of good leaders. Some organizations develop leaders internally, whereas other organizations recruit externally. To get the best leaders for senior or highly specialized positions, “head-hunters” are more often the chosen route.

We can still find theories that propose good leaders can be found among those who happen to be born with (or have developed early in life) the desired traits and theories that contend good leadership can be learnt, more or less by anyone. These basic theoretical assumptions do, of course, lead to totally different strategies regarding how to supply your organization with good leaders. The former assumption would imply increased efforts to find the correct people, whereas the latter assumption would suggest that efforts are made to improve how we teach leadership and develop leaders. These latter issues were discussed at a conference, “Becoming a Leader – A Matter of Education?” [1], which was held in Bodø in Northern Norway in June 2016. The majority of the articles within this special issue were presented at this conference.

The main question at the conference, though, was whether it is relevant to offer bachelor programs in leadership, as some universities have started to do. This is still a somewhat controversial question, as many still believe that one needs deep knowledge of the function(s) one is leading to be able to lead them in an effective way. This is a common argument against offering bachelor programs in leadership as well as against making leadership or management into a true profession of its own. One of the articles in this special issue deals with exactly that: how can you gain legitimacy when leading people within another profession. Anne Lund, in “Leader legitimacy – A matter of education?” (p. 20) suggests that leaders, in this situation, could adopt a servant, or customized/motivating leadership approach, or demonstrate their expertise in the leadership field itself, to gain legitimacy.

However, the conference did not focus only on the issue of the relevancy of offering Bachelor programs. The main part of discussions concerned how leadership education as well as leadership development can be improved. Thus, these discussions and therefore the remaining articles rest on the assumption that (good) leadership can be learnt.

“Exploiting formal, non-formal and informal learning when using business games in leadership education” (p. 16) authored by Thomas Henriksen, Kenneth Borgeesen and Rikke Nielsen, suggests that while games and simulations as such may be valuable for learning leadership, less formal activities connected to such games and simulations – such as free-flowing group conversations – should not be underestimated; actually, these can be equally, if not more, valuable.

Daniel Belet offers his support for Action Learning – originally proposed by Reginald Revans – in management training and education. In his article “Enhancing leadership skills with action learning: a promising way to improve the effectiveness of leadership” (p. 13), Belet suggests a version of action learning that is combined with Appreciative Inquiry methods and, thus, combines collaborative reflection with supportive questions and atmosphere.

Two of the articles offer thoughts on the mindset we may have when thinking about what leadership and management is and, therefore, how leadership development activities should be set up. The first is “Becoming a leader-manager: A matter of training and education: the need to exercise the right activity at the right time”, authored by Nhien Nguyen and Jens Hansen (p. 30). These authors suggest that individuals need to learn to perform both of the roles of “leader” and “manager”, and that they should be prepared in a way that helps them switch between these roles, in accordance with what the particular situation demands.

The second article dealing with mindsets is Thomas Andersson and Stefan Tengblad’s “An experience based view on leader development: Leadership as an emergent and complex accomplishment” (p. 30). Andersson and Tengblad suggest that leadership development initiatives are brought closer to the realities of managerial work. They argue that the former have traditionally promised too much and assumed a level of simplicity that does not exist in organizational life, i.e. the complexity of managerial work has not really been considered.

We also have articles that rather focus on leadership education, such as Jon Billsberry’s “Once learned, never forgotten: Effective leadership development with social construction as a threshold concept” (p. 24). Billsberry suggests that leadership education should help students to surface and unravel their implicit theories of what leadership may be about. He suggests that this could be accomplished by presenting students with images of well-known leaders and asking the students to clarify who, in their view, is the leader among the group of people being considered. Using this “repertory grid analysis” method, to tease out students’ assumptions about what constitutes a good leader, may be equally important for leadership education and leadership development.

All in all, we believe that these six articles each have something important to offer when it comes to improving leadership development initiatives, whether taking place within organizations or taking place externally. That is, of course, presuming we have chosen a strategy for ensuring good leadership in our organization that is more in line with the assumption that (good) leadership can be learnt.

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