Abstract

In 2012 it was estimated that approximately $170 billion is spent annually on leadership development activities globally (Myatt, 2012). Surprisingly however, given the scale of this industry, little attention has been paid to understanding the impact of these interventions in either the academic or practice literature (Avolio et al., 2010, Collins and Holton, 2004, Hannum and Craig, 2010). In effect, investment in leadership development is frequently ‘an act of faith’ (Constable and McCormick, 1987) and evaluation, where considered, is usually an afterthought with insufficient depth and rigour (Anderson, 2010, Burgoyne et al., 2004).

Hannum and Craig (2010) suggest that careful evaluation of leadership development is essential if we are to better understand the ways in which leadership development interventions influence individual, group and/or organisational performance. Where studies do investigate the impact(s) of leadership development they tend to focus almost exclusively on positive outcomes and/or the achievement of pre-determined targets (Avolio et al., 2010, Campbell et al., 2003, Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002, McCauley et al., 2004, McGurk, 2010, Yeung and Ready, 1995). This paper sheds light on the ‘shadow side’ of leadership development and its potential for counter-productive and dysfunctional effects –
a notion that does not appear to have translated across into analyses of leadership development, despite a growing body of work on the shadow side of leadership (Conger, 1990, Kets de Vries and Balazs, 2011).

These issues are explored through a longitudinal study of a corporate leadership development programme. ‘Shadow’ effects included how the programme contributed to fragmentation between different organisational units or ‘out-groups’ (whilst at the same time strengthening relationships within these factions or ‘in-groups’). The case study organisation, a large multinational telecoms company, invested in the leadership development programme in order to enhance collaboration and to break down organisational silos yet, to a moderate degree it could be argued that the opposite occurred. One of the contributing factors to this was through unintentionally providing participants with a chance to share their organisational experiences. This led to some participants coming to the conclusion that life was better in their own organisational unit rather than wishing to associate themselves with the organisation as a whole. The timing of large scale organisational restructuring which took place early on in the programme also played a key role in this fragmentation. The programme may have also enhanced a sense of employee disengagement from the organisation as well as increased negative sentiments towards it.

In order to understand how such outcomes arose, from a programme that by-in-large was well run and had many positive learning impacts for participants, it is important to take a long-term perspective and to explore the interactions between organisational structures and processes with the leadership development intervention. Interviews with participants, line managers and consultants carried out at three different points in time over a period of more than 12 months, revealed how the programme had differential effects over time and how these were influenced by institutional changes outside the remit of the people responsible for design and delivery of the programme.

From the data three conceptual dimensions were identified which together captured the progressive effect on the experience of the leadership development programme for the participants. These are identity, organisational culture and organisational context. The latter was defined as comprising of elements of ‘structure’ and ‘time’. An analysis of the interactive effects of each of these dimensions over time helped to illuminate the ‘shadow side’ of this programme and responds to calls for more longitudinal research in both leadership development (Day, 2011) and more specifically in the evaluation of leadership development (Abrell et al., 2011, Burgoyne et al., 2004).

This paper also elucidates the importance of a discursive perspective on leadership development which explores the possibility for leadership development to enable a shift in discourse and in so doing provide opportunities for alternative ways of engaging and for culture change. Drawing on Western’s (2013) four leadership discourses, it shows how a
leadership development programme introduced a ‘therapist’ discourse, characterised by more participative leadership approaches and partially represented through parental style metaphors. However the extent to which the new discourse presided and had a lasting effect on identity is questionable due to the already dominant ‘controller’ and ‘messiah’ discourses present in the organisation and changing context, which paradoxically seemed to reinforce the extant discourses rather than enable change. Through this analysis the paper demonstrates that the emergence of new discourses may have shadow effects. This is particularly important when a leadership development programme provides a certain view of leadership that does not resonate with the organisational environments in which they work when leaving the safe space of the programme. This can in turn lead to frustration and disengagement from the organisation.

Furthermore by taking a critical perspective this paper also considers the impact and effects of a leadership development programme in terms of tangible possibilities in addition to the potential for fantasy, (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006) in terms of an illusion of agency when there is in fact none. This is particularly illustrated through participants shift in identity from viewing themselves as ‘managers’ to ‘leaders’.

This paper highlights the value of a broader, more holistic approach to leadership development evaluation that extends beyond narrowly defined measures of performance and cause and effect relationships. It concludes that whilst most evaluative studies of leadership development focus almost exclusively on short-term improvements in individual, group and / or organisational performance, there may well be important, unintended consequences which have long-term implications for participants and their organisations. This makes an important theoretical contribution to the extant leadership development literature.

References


