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Beyond (just) the workplace: A theory of leader development across multiple domains

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Synopsis

As leader development occurs in all domains of life (e.g., work, community, family, friends), taking a "whole person" approach has significantly advanced the science and practice of leader development. However, most work in this area has addressed development within one context only and most commonly the work domain. The paper presents a theory that describes the process and content of leader development as it occurs across multiple life domains. We applied sense-making to explain the unique developmental processes that operate differently at the intersection of two or more domains rather than within a single domain by describing how and when cross-domain sense-making builds a leader identity and competence.

Introduction and Background

Research and popular press articles point to the developmental potential of cross-domain leadership experiences such as using parenting skills to develop leadership skills and volunteering on a non-profit board to boost one's career. However, we know very little of what, how, and in what conditions development occurs across multiple domains. Unlike one domain, development across multiple domains engages different learning systems at a higher level of abstraction, garnering improved learning and outcomes. Drawing on connections made between two or more experiences at a higher level can lead to better transferability to future.

This happens through the development of a leader's identity and competence.

Leader identity represents one facet of an individual's overall self-concept specific to leadership. Leader identity develops along four dimensions: strength, integration, level, and meaning. Strength refers to the extent to which an individual identifies as a leader. Integration refers to the extent to which a leader identity is integrated within a global self-concept rather than splintered across multiple domains. Leaders identify with one or more of three concept levels: individual (identity is based in individual uniqueness), relational (the self is defined by close relationships), or collective (identity is based in group membership). The meaning of a leader identity is grounded in the understanding of leadership an individual holds and ranges from relatively simple role-based authority, to also acknowledge influence processes, and finally to include advanced and complex conceptualisations involving interdependencies across levels in organisations.

Summary of the Theory

The theory draws on the sensemaking process to describe development of leader identity and competence. Sensemaking involves four interweaving components, capturing how leaders notice cues, interpret cross-domain cues relevant to leadership, author leader identities based on their interpretations, and finally, enact their enhanced leader identities to develop leader competence. See figure 1.

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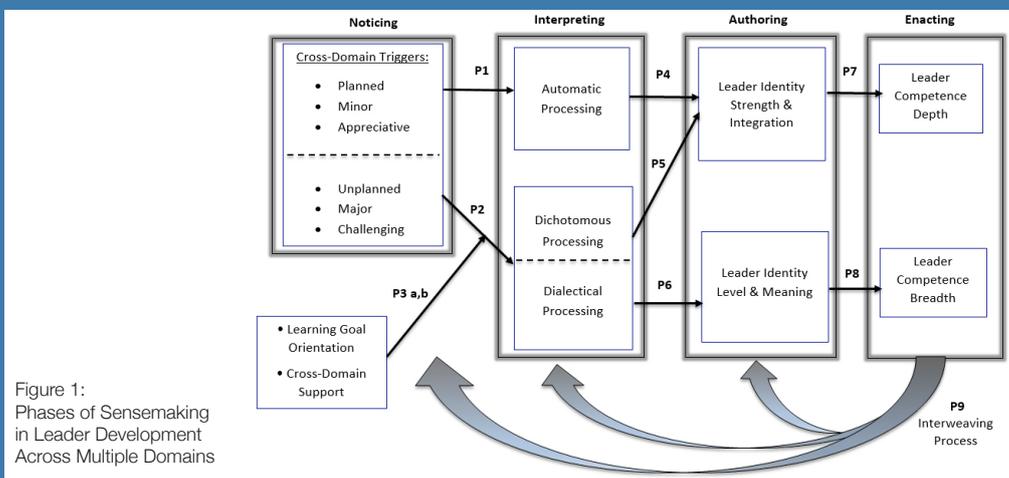
Figure 1:
Phases of Sensemaking in Leader Development Across Multiple Domains

The sensemaking process begins when leaders notice connections and disconnections about aspects of the social environments, in thoughts or actions of the leader, or differences in perceived effectiveness of certain behaviours across domains. For example, a leader might notice feeling like a leader at work, but not at home. Noticing is triggered by events that may be more or less planned or unplanned, appreciative or challenging, and major or minor. After noticing connections and disconnections, leaders interpret their meanings. Connections that fit with a leader's understandings of leadership are usually interpreted automatically. These are generally positive and reaffirm one's self as a leader in multiple roles, such as using motivational skills acquired at work to motivate a sporting team.

However, disconnections often require more interpretive work because they bring light to the contradictory or seemingly incompatible. For example, a disconnection might involve a leader who experiences great success in one domain (e.g., at work) and is expecting a similar degree of success in a new role in a different domain (e.g., sitting on a city council), but is met with resistance and failure. Disconnections can be processed using dichotomous thinking, which involves categorising two ideas in absolute, non-overlapping categories (e.g. either/or, all-or-nothing). This strategy highlights the dissimilarities across domains and stresses the perceived irreconcilable elements across domains and weakens and splintering one's leader identity.

Alternatively, dialectical thinking involves an acceptance of contradictions and an exploration of dynamic tensions and interplays beyond apparent oppositional binaries (e.g. "both-and"). This strategy produces broader meanings in which the dynamic tensions of disconnections are viewed as mutually re-enforcing relationships and leads to development of level and broadening of meaning of leadership.

We suggest leaders are more likely to engage in dialectical processing with they take a learning goal orientation and are supported. Learning-goal orientation is marked by as embracing, thriving, and persisting in challenging situations. Social support from someone who possesses a more complex meaning of leadership is a crucial source of support for the use of dialectic thinking as well.

As leaders interpret and process multi-domain connections and disconnections, they begin to take ownership of them. The third component of the sensemaking process, authoring, represents an articulation of a leader's personal narrative in light of identified meanings of cross-domain connections and disconnections.

As leaders' identities are strengthened, leaders are motivated to enact behaviours consistent with their leader identity. This represents changes to the depth of competence. As changes to the content (i.e., level and meaning) of one's leader identity increase, the leader is able to employ a broader range of skills, and thus increase breadth of competence. A leader with a larger behavioural repertoire is able to perform a wider range of behaviours, more likely to be able to meet demands of a variety of situations and expectations of various stakeholders, and function effectively in a variety of situations.

Implications

Understanding developmental opportunities across multiple domains becomes helpful for leaders wishing to integrate experiences from all areas of life into their development, particularly at work. Specifically, by (a) increasing opportunities to notice leadership features of connections and disconnections across time and domains, (b) taking a learning goal approach, (c) drawing on supportive relationships, (d) engaging in dialectic processing, (e) opening up to new ways of thinking of leadership and self-as-leader, and (f) engaging in opportunities to enact and practice leadership in multiple domains. The ability to harness experiences already occurring outside of work could result in significant time and cost savings for individuals and organisations. As leaders capitalise on time engaged in deliberate practice in other domains, they build skill mastery. Finally, cross-domain development has implications for leadership education. By encouraging reflection on leadership not only in work, but also in formal education programs (e.g. MBA) that encourage students to consider and challenge their assumptions. Supportive relationships among faculty and peers may provide a context for leaders to try out new ways of thinking about and enacting leadership.

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