

Leader identity development

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SUMMARY

Chapter 1 of this dissertation sets the scene for the research studies undertaken. It discusses that organizations worldwide are yearly spending billions on leadership development initiatives to build better leaders and enhance collective capacity for leadership. It recounts that higher education, and particularly universities and business schools, have responded to this growing need for effective leaders and enhanced leadership capacity in organizations by offering various leadership development initiatives. It also highlights that the last decade has seen a mounting wave of criticism of what happens in those programs. Critics argue that business schools, through their current approach to leadership development, are not adequately preparing their students for the ambiguity and complexity of leadership challenges in the contemporary workplace and are producing graduates that are ill-prepared to lead.

These issues in organizations and higher education raise two questions: (1) What can be done to support organizations in improving leader effectiveness and enhancing leadership emergence? and (2) What can be done to aid business schools in better preparing their students to take the lead in the complex leadership challenges that lie ahead in the workplace? This dissertation argues that the answer to these questions and the solution to these issues may lie in taking a different approach to leadership development. More specifically, the present dissertation proposes that this different approach to leadership development involves incorporating cognitive components of leadership development, and in particular, a focus on leader identity. This is because theory suggests and initial empirical work is starting to show the important role of leader identity in leadership development processes (e.g., ongoing leader development, leadership emergence, leadership behavior and effectiveness).

With this growing evidence of the important role of leader identity in leadership processes, so does the need to gain a better understanding of *what* leader identity entails and *how* leader identity can be shaped and developed. This is the focus of the studies presented in this dissertation. In other words, across this dissertation as a whole, the purpose is to gain a better understanding of the content of leader identity (the “what” of leader identity) and the process of leader identity development (the “how” of leader identity). To that end, four studies were conducted that all took a distinct qualitative approach. Through these studies, this dissertation aims to contribute to theory-building and

provide practical insights that can help provide solutions for the big issues that organizations and business schools are struggling with.

In **Chapter 2**, we report on a study undertaken to gain a better understanding of what the concept of leader identity entails. For this purpose, we explored how undergraduate students at business school think about leaders, leadership, and the self as leader. In this study, leader identity was placed at the core of the data analysis and it was examined how schemas on leaders and leadership relate to leader identity. Main findings indicate that leader identity is related to a two-fold cognitive mechanism of (1) degree of schema alignment and (2) broadness of perspective. Phrased differently, people claim a leader identity based on their understanding of leadership and compared to who they view as leaders. The more alignment there is between these various views and the broader and complex an individual's view on leadership and being a leader, the stronger the leader identity. These findings indicate that leadership development initiatives should start with an understanding of how people think about leadership and give meaning to being a leader.

In **Chapter 3**, we present a conceptual study that looks into how leader identity can be shaped and developed in an educational context. A review of literature was conducted to outline a coherent organizing framework for leader identity development through formal classroom experiences. This study integrates and synthesizes existing research lines on experiences-based leadership development and identity-based leader development. These research lines are to date still quite disconnected. By integrating and synthesizing these research lines, this conceptual paper sought to offer a better understanding of the connections between leadership development, leader identity and learning from experiences in order to show possibilities for integrating leader identity work into leadership education and leadership development offerings at business schools. Findings show that classroom experiences can be purposefully leveraged as holding environments for shaping and developing students' identity as a leader through a process of meaning-making, therewith creating a foundation for ongoing leadership development and future workplace leadership effectiveness. Holding environments for leader identity work provide experiences that both challenge existing ways of conceptualizing and practicing leadership and support meaning-making of new perspectives of leadership and being a leader. These experiences are embedded in a micro learning environment that offers safety and reassurance on the learning process.

Chapter 4 follows up on the conceptual paper with an empirical study that explores how formal classroom experiences in higher education become moments that matter for students' leader identity development. In this study, we drew on the in-depth analysis of 487 narrative reports of undergraduate students at business school to investigate the conditions under which (*when*) and the mechanism by which (*how*) formal classroom experiences in higher education translate into outcomes of leadership development (*what*). Findings highlight that learning from formal classroom experiences in the context of higher education is conditional to specific developmental features embedded in the experience and contingent on a meaning-making system that is theorized to mediate between experiences and learning outcomes. The study also shows the multidimensional and interrelated nature of learning outcomes generated through this process.

In **Chapter 5**, we build on the key findings from the studies presented in chapter 2, 3 and 4 and explore how leader identity is shaped and developed via experiences and meaning-making of experiences. In this chapter, we shift our focus from students to organizational leaders and from classroom experiences in the context of higher education to varied experiences over time and across situations. We draw on detailed narratives of the leadership development trajectories of 14 organizational leaders. Through uncovering the in-depth thoughts, experiences, and constructed meaning about the developmental trajectory as a leader, we seek to better understand the ways in which leader identity develops. Findings show that development in leader identity strength occurred as the meaning of the organizational leaders' identity moved through three cognitive shifts: (1) a development in cognitive complexity, (2) a development in schema alignment, and (3) a development in self-concept clarity. These cognitive shifts were accompanied by specific ways of meaning-making, i.e., identity work.

In **Chapter 6**, we offer a general discussion and conclusion on the four studies presented in this dissertation. We synthesize the findings of the studies and offer a conceptual model for leader identity development via meaning-making of experiences. In broad strokes, the model suggests that leader identity development unfolds as a gradual process of schema growth, alignment and integration that involves a dynamic system of meaning-making that is prompted and facilitated by experiences that contain specific developmental features. Through these developmental features, the experience triggers and stimulates a meaning-making system through which individuals determine the value,

relevance, and usefulness of the experience and draw lessons learned that inform future thinking, acting, and being. Individuals who actively engage in particular ways of meaning-making to form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise a sense of self as a leader (i.e., identity work), are able to shape and develop an original sense of self as a leader.

We discuss how the findings of the studies presented in this dissertation offer various insights for science and practice. For science, the research in this dissertation offers novel insights into the content of leader identity and the process of leader identity development. For practice, the research presented in this dissertation highlights the importance of taking a cognitive approach to leadership development, both for students in higher education as well as for leaders in organizations. We believe that leadership development initiatives that revolve around creating schema awareness, stimulating schemas openness, integrating opportunities for deliberate practice, and fostering and guiding reflective practice may aid people to take a more proactive approach to the development of an identity as a leader. It will give them the sense of control needed to be in the driver's seat of their leadership development.

