Leader identity development

Citation for published version (APA):

Zaar, S. (2024). *Leader identity development: the role of schemas, meaning-making, and experiences.* [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20240419sz

Please check the document version of this publication:

• A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
• The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
• The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

Link to publication

IMPACT PARAGRAPH

Societal relevance

Leadership development has long been a strategic priority for many organizations (DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012). Viewing effective leadership as a main driver for organizational success, organizations worldwide are yearly spending billions on leadership development initiatives to build better leaders and enhance collective capacity for leadership (Vogel, Reichard, Batistič, & Černe, 2021).

Higher education, and particularly universities and business schools, have responded to this growing need for effective leaders and enhanced leadership capacity in organizations. Through their leadership education, their research on leadership, and the provision of leadership training, they aim to offer valuable learning platforms for leadership development. Indeed, leadership development is increasingly considered to be an important objective and outcome of universities and business schools around the globe (DeRue, Sitkin, & Podolny, 2011).

Yet, while organizations are investing heavily in leadership development programs and while large numbers of students swarm to undergraduate, graduate, and executive programs that promise to transform them into effective leaders, the last decade has seen a mounting wave of criticism of what happens in those programs (Petriglieri & DeRue, 2018). Questions have been raised from outside and inside management academia not only about whether and how business schools truly fulfill their promise to develop leaders, but also about what kind of leaders they develop (Petriglieri & DeRue, 2018). Critics argue that they 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 (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005).

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.

Based on the findings of the studies presented in this dissertation, this different approach to leadership development involves incorporating cognitive components of leadership development, and in particular, a focus on leader identity. Main findings of our studies indicate that leader identity is a consequence of 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. We believe that leadership development initiatives that create this awareness, that provide individuals with a framework for understanding the cognitive basis for leadership development, and with an understanding of how cognitive schemas of leadership can promote or block leadership development, can help people to be better prepared to take the lead in challenges in the workplace. We then support individuals in being able to see themselves as leaders, prepare them for the complexity and ambiguity of leadership as found in organizational settings, and increase the likelihood of formal and informal leadership emergence.

Our main findings also show that shaping and developing a leader identity involves a gradual process of schema growth and integration through the development of cognitive complexity, schema alignment, and self-concept clarity. This gradual process unfolds as people engage in varied developmental experiences over time and in meaning-making of these experiences. Findings indicate that developmental experiences in higher education settings are characterized by presenting a constructive challenge, demonstrating purpose and direction for learning, providing room for practice and role immersion, and offering sense-making support. 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, are able to shape and develop an original sense of self as a leader. This identity work revolves around unlearning and reframing, role modeling and experimentation, and reflective practice. 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 their sense of self as a leader and give them the sense of control needed to be in the driver's seat of their leadership development.

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. For this purpose, we have transferred our insights to academia and practice through various valorization activities that took place during the timeframe of this PhD project, through current valorization activities, and to future valorization activities that have already been set in motion. We discuss these past, current, and future valorization activities in the following section.

Sharing insights

Findings of this dissertation have been shared with the scientific community through presentations at academic conferences, such as the European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology Conferences (EAWOP) and the Developing Leadership Capacity Conference (DLCC), and to member gatherings of academic networks, such as the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD, Belgium). The findings have also been shared through presentations and workshops for audiences of diverse students and professionals, as well as for support staff and academics at various universities, among which the University of Lausanne (Switzerland), Rotterdam School of Management (The Netherlands), Eindhoven University (The Netherlands), Luiss Guido Carli University (Italy), and of course Maastricht University (The Netherlands).

Findings of this dissertation have also been shared with organizations and organizational networks. For example, we have presented our research at corporate meetings and events of a large variety of profit, non-profit, and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., Housing Cooperations, Public Schools, World Wide Fund for Nature), and as part of corporate leadership development initiatives for networks of early career professionals and entrepreneurs (e.g., Young Management), networks of coaches (e.g., Premium), and networks of CEOs and executives (e.g., Chamber of Commerce). We have also shared the

findings of our studies through leadership development trajectories, coaching, counselling, and mentoring of students, working professionals, and executives. Additionally, the findings of already published parts of this dissertation have been shared with the students that participated in our studies.

Furthermore, findings of the studies that are currently under review will also in due course be shared with the students and organizational leaders that participated in our research studies. The interviews with the organizational leaders that were part of our study in chapter 5 already offered valorization value. Several organizational leaders explicitly mentioned at the end of the interview, that the interview process had offered them 'food for thought', made them 'see certain links and connections, and showed pitfalls' about the findings, and inspired them to 'reflect further' to inform their leadership development trajectory. To illustrate:

> *"I will no doubt reflect back again on this [interview], of what it was all about, and on what I can further learn from it." (N7)*

Last, announcements on studies published have been posted on social media accounts and websites of the authors and the authors' affiliated institutions. Findings of this dissertation have also been captured in short videos and popular press articles to make the insights available to a broad range of academics and practitioners. For example, a short video titled "Talking Business: How Leadership is Learned and Developed" is available on the website and digital media channels of Maastricht University and a short video titled "How Business Students Think about Leadership" is available on digital media channels of the Academy of Management (AoM). A Dutch popular press article with the title "How Business Students Think about Leadership" (In Dutch: Hoe Denken Studenten Bedrijfskunde over Leiderschap) can be found in the (online) Magazine of Labor Issues (in Dutch: Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken). A popular press article with the title "AoM Insights: Three Ways to Build Better Leaders" is available in the online magazine of the Academy of Management (AoM).

Future valorization activities and research are planned around publishing a higher education textbook on student leadership development and on setting up a research line that extends on the findings of this dissertation. For the textbook, a current publication proposal is being discussed with an international higher education publisher. For the research line, a longitudinal research study connecting leader identity and leader health and wellbeing has been set up. This

study qualitatively explores the concept and dimensions of leader health and wellbeing, and longitudinally investigates the relationships between leadership coaching, leader identity development, and leader health and wellbeing. The study uses a mixed-method research design and tracks development of professionals and leaders over a time period of 18 months.

Concluding thoughts

The findings from this dissertation offer novel understanding of the content of leader identity and the process of leader identity development. We offer insights into how business schools can best contribute to their students' ongoing development as leaders, how organizations can effectively contribute to the continuous development of their organizational leaders, and how individuals can get into the driver's seat of their own leadership development. The studies included in this dissertation offer suggestions for curricular reform and innovation, draw lessons from the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches, and show tools for supporting a holistic approach to leadership development. We believe that these insights are useful to anyone who is captivated by, involved in, or responsible for the complex endeavor of developing mindful approaches, meaningful experiences, and mastery environments for leadership development.

REFERENCES

Benjamin, B., & O'Reilly, C. (2011). Becoming a leader: Early career challenges faced by MBA graduates. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *10*(3), 452–472.

Bennis, W. G., & O'Toole, J. (2005). How business schools lost their way. *Harvard Business Review*, *83*(5), 96–104.

DeRue, D. S., Nahrgang, J. D., Hollenbeck, J. R., & Workman, K. (2012). A quasi-experimental study of after-event reviews and leadership development. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *97*(5), 997–1015.

DeRue, D. S., Sitkin, S. B., & Podolny, J. M. (2011). From the guest editors: Teaching leadership - issues and insights. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *10*(3), 369–372.

Petrieglieri, G., & DeRue, D. S. (2018). How can business schools develop leaders? Retrieved August 30, 2018, from http://aom.org/DevelopLeaders/

Vogel, B., Reichard, R. J., Batistič, S., & Černe, M. (2021). A bibliometric review of the leadership development field: How we got here, where we are, and where we are headed. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *32*(5).

*