

*The Development of Leaders: Being, Knowing, and Doing
Leading Through Self Mastery*

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Abstract

The study of leadership must include the question “how are leaders made?”. Researchers agree that to develop as a leader requires three dimensions: Knowing, Doing, and Being. Together, these three dimensions enable a leader to bring the Self and their abilities into the group interactions and organizational success. Therefore, all three need to be acknowledged for their role individually in leader development. The common theme in this research is that leaders are made or developed over a period of time. However, there is a divide in how much weight is given to each dimension: knowing, doing, or being a leader. Knowing includes the various aspects of intelligence and reflection in being aware of one’s surroundings and social interactions. Doing consists of problem-solving, managing conflict, and utilizing adaptive skills. Being highlights the development of self-concept, identity, and an individual’s transformational abilities. Knowing and Doing are about a process where the leader’s actions are amid their leading phase, and Being is about identity development and one’s self-concept and self-mastery. This paper argues that although all three dimensions of leader development are essential; Being is the most critical dimension of leader development. The author reviews five research articles and, through discussion, shows that the Being dimension is the first and most important to develop as a leader. The author concludes with a call for future leadership development research on self-mastery and investment in creating the self-concept of leader development.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Transformation, Reflection Process, Adaptability to Change, Leadership Education, Reflect, Adaptive Leadership, Contingency, Self-Mastery

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Introduction

The study of leadership must include the question “how are leaders made?”. A common theme in leadership research is that leaders are made or developed over a period of time. However, there is a divide in how much weight is given to each dimension: knowing, doing, or being a leader (Nohria and Khurana, 2010, p.20-24). Researchers attempt to answer the question, “what makes a good leader?” based on the lens of their own discipline. However, the researchers have divided perspectives on what is important. Some argue that specific personal attributes make one a leader, while others assert that a leader performs a particular set of social functions or maintains a role in the system of social relations (Nohria and Khurana, 2010, p.16). This paper argues that although all three dimensions of leader development, namely: knowing, doing, and being, are essential, Being is the most vital dimension of leader development. Before a leader can know or do, the leader needs to recognize that being selected to lead is a responsibility to followers and the organization, and to lead effectively; the leader must know their self-concept identity and be a willing participant in the journey towards self-growth and transformation (Ibarra, Snook, and Ramo, 2010; Avolio, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2010).

Self-mastery is the essence of Being. According to Lata (2021), “Self is the I, me, myself. Mastery is a deep understanding of my needs, desires, addictions, neuroses, and the ability or wisdom to discern the choices that allow us to maintain self-control through self-regulation on our tendencies.” Regardless of the discipline or industry, the being or self-mastery dimension of leadership is a set of behaviors, attitudes, core values, and mental models that sets one apart from followers. Therefore, leadership education programs need to focus on the tools and techniques that cultivate the essence of being a leader.

Although different researchers give being, knowing, and doing different weights, all three are needed for leader development. Together, these three dimensions enable a leader to bring the Self and their abilities into the group interactions and organizational success. Therefore, all three need to be acknowledged for the role they play individually in leader development. Knowing includes the various aspects of intelligence and reflection in being aware of one’s surroundings and social interactions (Conger, 2010; McCall, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). Doing includes the ability to problem solve, manage conflict, and utilize adaptive skills (McCall, 2010; Avolio, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). Finally, Being highlights the development of self-concept, identity, and an individual’s transformational abilities (Nohria et al., 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010).

Literature Review

Nohria et al. (2010) discuss that a leader is developed through the paradigm of knowing, doing, and being there is a divide between the researchers who focus on knowing and doing together (McCall, 2010; Conger, 2010) while the being aspect is generally isolated (Nohria et al., 2010, Ibarra et al., 2010; Avolio, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). Knowing and doing are about a process where the leader’s actions are amid their leading phase, and being is about identity development and one’s self-concept and self-mastery.

Being Dimension

Based on their upbringing, some people may see themselves as leaders and guides from an early age. However, irrespective of upbringing, a desire to learn what it truly means to be a

leader and an interest in reflecting on self-concept are equally crucial in leader development (Ibarra et al., 2010). While some have the desire to lead, some want to understand the Self as a leader. To that end, formal leadership education can allow not only to “clarify the leadership roles and responsibilities to advance [but also to] address derailing behaviors” (Conger, 2010, p.710). This means that formally studying the self-concept of being a leader can assist an individual in areas of self-confidence and identity development which will be essential in leading followers and organizations.

Historically, anyone successful in one situation was placed in another challenging position to observe if the individual flounders or succeeds. The former was the end of the career, while the latter meant a much more difficult situation awaited (Conger, 2010). Today there is enough evidence that true expertise requires more than a decade of learning and development; and the realization that leading is about interdependence (Conger 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). To begin somewhere, however, requires introspection; as Kouzes et al. (1987) state, “To truly develop as being a leader requires ‘figuring your own voice’” (quoted in Conger, 2010, p.714).

Being a leader involves authenticity and the ability to make meaning of the various associations, relationships, and ideas of the future Self (Ibarra et al., 2010; Avolio, 2010). Thinking about the Self requires an internal compass and a self-authoring mind, in the words of Kegan et al. (2010). A self-authoring mind involves one’s ability to reflect, adapt, and transform into the image one holds of oneself. As Markus and Nurius (1986) explain, “an important component of the self-concept is a person’s possible selves- the image an individual has about who he or she might become, would like to become, or fears becoming in the future” (quoted in Ibarra et al., 2010, p.659).

To be a leader, therefore, first and foremost, requires an image of what one sees as an essential aspect of leadership and the ability to see his or her future self in that role (Ibarra et al., 2010). Conger (2010) argues that individual development requires investment such as leadership vision, communication, role-modeling behavior, and motivational empowerment approaches to enable the individual to begin to think of oneself as a leader. This is because prior to acting as a leader, one needs to feel like a leader. When one thinks like a leader, they can recognize and reflect on what a good versus an ineffective leader looks like (Avolio, 2010) and what is expected from them in a leadership role; in other words, knowing the expectations that come with the position. Knowing involves a leader’s intellectual ability and rational, pragmatic, and circumstantial acumen (Nohria et al., 2010). It consists of the leader’s ability to use emotional intelligence for social awareness.

Knowing Dimension

Between being and knowing is a transition space that Ibarra et al., 2010 call the liminal state. The liminal state is where the idea of who one is and what one wants to become is in flux. In this liminal space, formal education and support from mentors and coaches come into play so that a leader can use help for their vision and learn from others’ experiences. It is in this space that the leader development transitions from being only an idea, a belief, and concept, to becoming a part of identity, where the leader can use the formal education, training, and vision of future Self and translate it into practice by following the lead of a support system of people in their life (Becker, 1953, quoted in Ibarra et al., 2010).

McCall (2010) says, “The fact is that no book, consultant, class, or series of classes, including an MBA, can teach anyone how to lead even a small team, let alone a big organization. It is a craft you can learn only through experience” (p.679). This means that education about leading alone is not enough. The experience is what teaches a leader to be situationally adaptive, and knowing is that liminal space. This is the stage where the leader is in the self-authoring mind, a place where the leader is learning to lead.

Historically, experience alone was the antidote to leadership challenges (Conger, 2010). Still, today research shows that competency cannot replace the wisdom and knowledge sharing between coaches and mentors and a leader’s development (Avolio, 2010). While it is understandable that not all experienced leaders will have the desire to aid in the growth and experience of a new leader, it truly is one of the most critical steps of a leadership dimension, from being and knowing to doing the act of making another leader. As Follett (1924) states, “Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders” (quoted in Avolio, 2010, p.741).

Doing Dimension

Most of the research about doing is paired with knowing. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine doing on its own to contrast it with the other two dimensions. When an individual has had the inner reflection and learned how to be a leader and can recognize circumstances that call for situationally adaptive skills gained through experience, it is then the leader can be a transformed agent of change not just for him or herself but for the other leaders coming down the pike (Ibarra et al., 2010; McCall, 2010; Avolio, 2010). As Kegan et al. (2010) state, “What will distinguish your leadership from others’ in the years ahead? We believe it will be your ability to develop yourself, your people, and your teams” (p.770). This means that true doing is what Kegan et al. (2010) call the self-transforming mind (p.774). This is where the leader is developing other leaders.

Discussion

Now that we have discussed the literature and seen how Being, Knowing, and Doing weave throughout the different research articles, next the author shows that being a leader plays a pertinent role in leadership development for a leader to lead successfully, and why Being is the most critical dimension of leader development. Per Lata (2021), “How often have we seen our leaders’ lack of self-mastery impact our lives? Whether you are leading a country, team, family, or Self, your ability to understand yourself and your triggers mean you can live with mindfulness, knowing that your actions impact others’ lives, whether directly or indirectly.” Please think of the Being dimension as a foundation or a platform (see figure 1), where the leader, as a person, carries, with him or herself, every learned behavior, identity, and past traumas or techniques to garner a response from others. This is also where the leader is doing the self-work through education, counseling, coaching, mentoring, etcetera, to break away from identities, and derailing behavior patterns that are not letting the leader, as an individual, realize their dream or vision of the future Self (Ibarra et al., 2010; Kegan et al., 2010).

Kegan et al., 2010, call being the beginning stage in adult development as the socialized mind, where the leader as an individual is shaped by his or her personal environment and acts and reacts to the environment from how the leader thinks others perceive him or her. Through self-work and time investment in educational programs and coaching, the leader then

transitions to the next level on the plateau, the self-authoring mind, which is also called knowing (Kegan et al., 2010).

The self-authoring mind or knowing is where the leader starts seeing the bigger picture and connecting the theoretical learnings to the experiences of tenured leaders. This process in adult development is where an individual begins taking responsibility for how he or she engages with their surroundings instead of permitting others to dictate how their actions will influence the leader's response (Ibarra et al., 2010, McCall, 2010; Avolio, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010).

When the leader, as an individual, makes the discernment to follow one's intuition peppered with guidance from experienced leaders (if such support is available to one), the leader then starts to feel and act like they are transitioning into the knowing dimension (McCall, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). The knowing dimension is a transitional space. It is up to the leader to continue to inhabit this space by continuing the journey of self-growth and learning from others' experiences. Otherwise, the technological and strategic advances in leadership and management will hold the leader behind if they do not grow with time (Keegan et al., 2010; Conger, 2010). Staying in the knowing space leads to true doing, which can take years to develop (Ibarra et al., 2010; McCall, 2010, Avolio, 2010, Kegan et al., 2010).

The true dimension of doing is when a developed leader can start coaching, mentoring, and developing new leaders with their experience (Kegan et al., 2010). The doing dimension is where the developed leader is genuinely someone who knows that they do not know everything and is willing to learn from others, yet stays true to the internal moral compass and is not swayed by others' perceptions (Ibarra et al., 2010, Avolio, 2010; Kegan et al., 2010). This shows that Being is the foundation of actual Doing.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author discussed the three dimensions of leadership development: Being, Knowing, and Doing. The author argued that although all three dimensions are essential for leader development, the least addressed dimension, Being, is the most important. The author reviewed five research articles and, through discussion, showed that the Being dimension is the first and most essential to develop self-mastery. Therefore, future leadership development research should invest time in understanding and developing the self-concept of being a leader.

Leadership education needs to embark on a journey of self-mastery because without it, we see leaders disconnected from themselves with responsibilities to lead others deprived of the proper education and plan to manage both the private and public spheres. Perhaps, then, we will have more self-aware leaders running organizations who are able to self-reflect, self-regulate, adapt, and transform themselves, their followers, and the organizations they lead.

Appendix

Fig. 1



(Internal) starts out as a desire for something better for self and transforms into a need to better the life of others.

- Transitioning from the socialized mind (liminal space)

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