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Let Natural Learning Arise!: Optimizing Organizational Learning Through a Customized Leadership Development Program

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper examined a tiered leadership development program (LDP) designed to optimize natural organizational learning.

Design/method/approach

The heuristic design of the tiered LDP linked learning pragmatic to the leaders' workplace to the LDP content instructed in real-time.

Findings

The longitudinal study showed the real-time connected natural learning and LDP instruction fortified participants' competencies systemically throughout the organization easily measured through the continuous assessment and feedback from multiple sources.

Originality

This paper introduces a unique and comprehensive tiered leadership development program that promotes stackable and transferable learning symbiotic of leaders' relationships and organizational tasks at a variety of organizational levels.

Keywords

Customized Leadership Development Program, Tiered Leadership Development, Natural Organizational Learning and Development, Leadership Development Program

Introduction

Learning is the invisible force that leaders tap into to accomplish their work. However, most leaders don't know how to optimize natural learning so they can better develop their skills and performance. This paper demonstrates how a customized, tiered leadership development program (LDP) can optimize natural learning to fortify leaders' competencies.

Popular LDP designs separate leaders away from their work area into remote classrooms. Unfortunately, this practice distances the learning experience from where leaders will employ their new skills. As a result, participants return to their workplace without having a deep understanding of how to use the LDP training to strengthen their leadership capabilities. While remote classroom learning allows participant to concentrate on instructions, the modern workplace is complex. Using a natural learning environment within such a complex environment helps the participant be more agile and adaptable to workplace circumstances (Roberts, 2013; Ma, 2018).

Roberts (2013) proposes a comprehensive and engaging tiered LDP that capitalizes on the learning that naturally occurs during a leader's shift so that it is transformative in real-time. Robert's (2013) heuristic model allows for continuous strengthening of leaders' ability through natural learning even after the leader exits the LDP (Simpson et al., 2015).

LDP Tier Model in Practice

Small cohorts of leaders (approximately 20-30 per LDP session) meet for one week to orient to the real-time LDP and to learn evidenced-based leadership content generalizable to current organizations wholly and specific to the leaders' industry. The small cohort-style programming coax attendees to bond and exercise natural learning adaptable to them as a collection of leaders. Figure 1 shows the tiered concept and flow as compared to popular LDP designs.

After orientation week, the LDP instructor meets weekly with participants within their work area to help them manage the learning in real-time in real situations. The participant learns to analyze the learning taking place within the work domain and continuously assesses his or her learning needs and improvements. The LDP instructor can be human resources personnel, supervisors, or external consultants whose job tasks include training and development of company employees in real-time within employee workspaces.

The tiered LDP proposed by Roberts (2013) was tested in a study by Roberts et al. (2017). Twenty-five leaders from various departments within a global educational firm attended the tiered LDP examined for the study. The organizational industry provided the context for the LDP learning outcomes fitting leadership issues needing improvements (Roberts, 2015). The longitudinal study of three years demonstrated leadership enhancements occurred in each tier as participants willingly connected the natural learning in their workspace to their development and growth (Roberts et al., 2017). Each year's tiered LDP was 10 months of learning that equipped leaders with the skills requisite to leading operations and personnel succinctly (Roberts, 2013; Roberts et al., 2017).

Weekly feedback sessions with the LDP instructor helped participants to celebrate achievements and to modify behaviors needing improvement. Mid-way through and at the end of each LDP, performance feedback forms were completed by the participants' manager and work team to analyze the participants' efforts. LDP participants used the feedback information to track their progress and apply recommended enhancements. Participants were interviewed at the end of each tier using open-ended questioning for data collection for the study conducted by Roberts et al. (2017) summarized below.

Tier 1 Results

Twenty-five leaders from various departments participated in Tier 1. Tier 1 content tasked the participant to analyze and apply effective behaviors that promoted inclusiveness, respect, and trust in their work teams. Three LDP instructor met weekly with participants in their workspace to highlight how the content may be appearing where the participant worked. Participant interview statements demonstrated they became more aware of how they viewed the content as it appeared in their behaviors with their team. Self-reflection and personal growth were the themes the participants tied the content to the natural learning.

Tier 2 Results

Fifteen Tier 1 participants aspired to advance to Tier 2. The remaining 10 created an alumni group to market the program, network their relationships and skills, and to help assess the overall program. Tier 2 content focused on participants identifying their own and others' resonant and dissonant leadership behaviors activated by the complexities of daily organizational operations

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3 and team needs. Participants' interview statements revealed two streams connecting content and
4 what they learned about their behaviors while engaging with their work tasks and workers.
5 Clarifying expectations about work responsibilities and behaviors (communication) and
6 intentionally building solid relationships within the team were the two themes participants
7 observed to be natural learning experiences streaming within the workspace.
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10 *Tier 3 Results*

11 Five of the 15 participants from Tier 2 decided to advance to Tier 3. This tier began with
12 participants shadowing executives within their firm to see first-hand the activities involved in
13 leading at the top. Participants also attended web-based workshops to learn how to strategically
14 resolve organizational issues using organizational behavior, development, and performance
15 management methods. All five participants demonstrated executive level behaviors and were
16 promoted to new senior level roles. Study interview statements showed participants recognized
17 networking among executives activated organizational learning in areas like strategy and
18 planning, forecasting, and innovation. They criticized the LDP, though, for not always selecting
19 the right "type" of leader to participate in the tiered LDP. Their statements proposed that they
20 perceived they learned within the workspace that leaders like them aspiring for top leadership
21 roles should be the "type" that would be allowed to participate in the tiered program. Bias
22 contained in perceptions could also be energized in leadership decisions-making learned within
23 the workplace (Roberts, 2017).
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27 **Overall Results**

28 The participants of the LDP became more self-aware that their work environment was brimming
29 with learning indicative of their engagement in work tasks and socialization. Performing the LDP
30 within the participants' work locale was experiential and activated the space for participants to
31 timely assess their application of the LDP content. LDP instructors assisted participants' in
32 identifying dynamic behaviors that detracted from leading effectively and to speedily set goals
33 for improvements. More immediate improvements was a time saver that could be lost by
34 participants attending a more remote classroom setting.
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38 Organizationally, practitioners can use this model to exercise leadership development shaped
39 within their unique natural learning settings. A prime benefit to practitioners and human
40 resources professionals in using this model is the timeliness of active learning that more
41 expediently cultivates leadership talent. Additionally, active workspace leadership development
42 could serve to swiftly identify a pool of leadership talent fit to lead the complexities of the
43 current global workforce.
44

45 **Limitations and Future Research**

46 Results of the study by Roberts et al. (2017) indicated natural learning connected to the
47 customized tiered LDP was a timely and effective method for systemic leadership development.
48 The study relied on assessment data perceived by workplace observers. Though perception bias
49 is prevalent in studies dependent on qualitative feedback, the feedback in this study was useful to
50 determine the heuristic value of the study parameters. Future research focused on identifying
51 specific elements of natural learning influencing leadership development would enrich the
52 customized content of the tiered LDP. Organizations considering a tiered LDP are cautioned to
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3 contemplate if their organization has the internal expertise to implement and facilitate such a
4 program or require external affordable consultancies for the LDP.
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