



Leadership Education in the Era of Disruption: What Can Business Schools Offer?

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Abstract. The paper addresses some of the dilemmas that business schools face in their attempts to teach, in conventional educational settings, practices such as leadership that are profoundly informed by experience. In the initial section of the paper, the recognition of *relationship* as the primary medium of education is advocated and the implications of this for the integration of leadership theory and practice are explored. Thereafter, the paper offers five generic themes for the content of leadership education programs in business schools and discusses various pedagogical processes through which the effectiveness of this thematic material, in addressing the dilemmas of leadership education in a changing world order, can be enhanced.

Keywords: leadership education, organizational leadership, personal leadership, leadership knowledge, leadership development.

1. Introduction

A recent paper by Larry Greiner and his colleagues at the University of Southern California (Greiner, Bhambri & Cummings, 2003) explores attempts at US business schools to find a way of teaching strategy effectively. In the paper they confront the dilemma that such a subject poses for educators in that strategy is something that is learnt through doing as much as it is learnt through conceptual analysis. They conclude that the teaching of strategy should be located within an integrated curriculum (and, preferably, offered as a 'capstone' course that draws on the knowledge gained from all prior subjects) that includes experiential learning through internships/business apprenticeships; case studies and participant reflection-in-action with respect to the cases covered; the development of theoretical perspectives; and the critical analysis of concepts and practices. However, implicit in their analysis is the insight that the best that business schools can do in the teaching of strategy is to create certain frames of reference that will facilitate future learning-in-action about strategy as the contexts of its application change over time and situation.

The task of teaching leadership in business schools faces challenges no less daunting. Much of what differentiates quality in leadership has been

acquired through experiences that business schools cannot simulate. For example, many of the leadership qualities globally admired in a political leader such as Nelson Mandela had their origin in experiences of confinement and solitude (twenty-seven years in prison), oppression, and a ‘security-in-self’ that emanated from mental models formed early in life as a consequence of family and community expectations of him being destined to lead his people. Similarly, a broad variety of lived experience, that includes military action (John F Kennedy), social marginalization (Martin Luther King and the German Jews, Marx, Freud and Einstein), and social privilege (having the luxury of time as Kenneth Clark [1969] pointed out in his analysis of leading European artists over the last millennium) has characterized the backgrounds of many respected leaders in a broad variety of fields of endeavor. This phenomenon was recognized implicitly in the early curricula of the British private schools (and subsequently exported to private and public schools across the globe) where the sportsfield, the stage, the debating chamber, and the challenging environmental contexts of ‘outward bound’ type activities, took their place alongside the classroom as forums for leadership development.

So what can business schools do in terms of leadership education? In this paper I contend that, at its foundation, the medium of education is *relationship* and, therefore, the primary pedagogical strategy for leadership education is the creation of a psycho-social learning environment rich in social capital and inter-personal experiential opportunities. With this contention underpinning all other aspects of my position, I offer five generic themes that could inform leadership education in business schools, and outline pedagogical strategies through which the educational value of each of these thematic offerings can be enhanced.

2. Relationship as the Primary Medium of Education

The creation of *relationship value* in an educational environment is a fundamental task of business school educators. This requires the empathic gesture of trying to understand the life situation of course participants and the leadership challenges faced by each of them. In this view, education involves a process of *deep support* (Zuboff & Maxmin, 2002: 12) where:

relationship value realization does not revolve around the acquisition of products or services. ... For the new individual the purpose of consumption is life itself – the acquisition of time and support necessary to pursue a life of psychological self-determination ... Individuals want honest assistance in meeting the challenges of their intricate lives ... Deep support provides ongoing relationship based on advocacy, mutual respect, trust, and the acute alignment of interests.

This form of support is achieved through the creation of a teaching/learning environment characterized by opportunities for deep inter-subjective encounters between participants. Such relationships open up for scrutiny the life situation of stakeholders in the learning endeavor, enabling each to access the 'life/knowledge interests' of others and, thereby, to get 'to know' each other in ways that facilitate the transparency and alignment of such interests. From this perspective, learning, creativity and knowledge are viewed as social capital resources – resources that are embedded in relationships between participants (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and in the social contexts of their acquisition and application (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As such inter-subjective communicative experiences occur, they generate within the stakeholder community other vital social capital resources such as trust that are essential to the 'risky business' of genuine learning. As participants' tacit knowledge bases, gained from life experience, are made explicit and shared through these communicative experiences, so these knowledge bases are integrated with the explicit content of the formal curriculum of the leadership course (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Choo, 1998). In this way, a focus on relationship value can generate strong positive learning cycles that lead to the deepening of the procedural and strategic knowledge bases that inform wise decision-making and other leadership attributes (Sternberg, 2003).¹

To initiate such learning forums, business schools may have to re-think, radically, the mental models that underpin their pedagogical practices. While there will always be a place for case studies and other conventional classroom-based approaches, new social practices such as those developed in the highly innovative learning forums of the software development industry, may be required. Through practices such as *check-ins* (brief emotional check-in with other team members each morning), *stand-up meetings* (brief social encounters that can be called at any time by any member of the organization on any specific issue), and *alignment meetings* (focused social occasions where individual life histories and life ambitions are articulated in the interests of developing shared identity resources and thus the alignment of the life interests of members of an organization) software development enterprises have created learning environments that are rich in mission-pertinent

1. Strategic knowledge refers to the usually tacit knowledge base that underlies a competent person's ability to make use of other forms of knowledge, as well as heuristic, control and learning strategies, in order to solve problems and carry out difficult tasks. The capacity to apply strategic knowledge successfully depends upon a sophisticated understanding of how such problem solving strategies are embedded in the context of the problem. Similarly, procedural knowledge refers to knowledge relating to the sequencing of events, monitoring of learning and other processes, and the general organization of people and workplace practices. This form of knowledge is also acquired tacitly through participation in well-organized endeavors led by experienced individuals or teams of people (see Rogoff, 1990, and Lave & Wenger, 1991, for greater detail on procedural and strategic knowledge and the 'situatedness' of its acquisition and use).

knowledge construction activities (for more details of these practices, see McCarthy & McCarthy, 2001).

3. Key Generic Themes for Leadership Education in Business Schools

With respect to the knowledge content of leadership programs, five key generic themes are offered upon which to base the formal curriculum. For each theme, I suggest a range of pedagogical strategies that could supplement the foundational strategy of *deep support* for participants through the creation of a learning environment, rich in social capital, in which their shared life-world can be explored.

3.1. Globalization and the Changing Political, Economic and Environmental Contexts of Business and Personal Life.

In order to make wise business and personal decisions, participants need to understand the macro context of their current life situation. As Friedman (1999) and Peters (2003) have attempted to show, pertinent issues such as the strategic impact of technology on business models; the pre-eminence of innovation as a competitive strategy; and the emergence of new economic and political powers (China and, in a different way, fundamentalist Islam) are events that are likely to impact the life-world of participants in profound ways. Add to these issues the imminent environmental crises (Gelbspan, 1997); the 21st Century bio-tech revolution (Rifkin, 1998); the outmoded 'enterprise logic' (set of assumptions, attitudes and practices) of current organizations (Zuboff & Maxmin, 2002); the global leadership crisis (Krantz, 1990) and the commoditization of life itself (Rifkin, 2000), and the implications for assisting participants to meet 'the challenges of their intricate lives' become even more daunting. This conceptual theme can be addressed adequately by conventional pedagogical and learning strategies. However, international exchanges, foreign travel excursions, ensuring 'requisite variety' (see Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) in class composition and the use of 'creatively abrasive' techniques to stimulate class interactivity (Leonard-Barton, 1995) are further ways of challenging the assumptions and prejudices of participants with respect to the issues upon which this theme is focused.

3.2. The Leader as Person: The Implications of Personal History for Leadership Orientation and Power Management Practices

Generally, life experience is the source of personal purpose, values, and an array of strengths and weaknesses in individuals. In response to life events and circumstances, individuals develop mental models (assumptions about self, others and 'how the world works' – see Senge, 1990) that tacitly 'edit' their interpretation of life experience and shape the meanings that they assign to such experience. On the basis of these mental models, a range of psychological and emotional strategies are formed that can be highly resistant to change even long after the circumstances of their formation have been transformed. As Kets de Vries (1993; 2004) has shown, depending on their nature, these mental models can be powerful motivators of destructive or constructive leadership practices. Thus facilitating an understanding of the socio-personal context of leadership behavior is a crucial aspect of leadership education that encourages the development of what Sternberg (2003: 387) calls 'successful intelligence' in leaders: namely the ability to make wise decisions within a specific socio-personal life-world. In this respect, the curriculum of business schools can be enriched by well-constructed and thoroughly-debriefed 'outward bound' type experiences that challenge participants physically, mentally and emotionally. Such experiences constitute an essential educational strategy with respect to exploring the emotional frames of reference of participants and to exposing inappropriate personal mental models to collective critique and analysis. Furthermore, the use of appropriate guest speakers (or course participants) who have relevant leadership experience and who are prepared to share their life narrative honestly and openly with the class can focus discussion and analysis on the dialectical relationship between life experience and various leadership orientations and forms of behavior.

3.3. Understanding and Setting the 'Strategic Core' of Personal and Corporate Endeavor

Leaders need to facilitate the establishment of clear purpose and direction within a stakeholder community and, based on a set of core values upon which consensus has been reached, they need to establish a 'negotiated order' for everyday action through which a stakeholder community intends to achieve its shared purpose (Moss Kanter, 1997; Drucker, 1964). This highly collaborative and political task demands considerable leadership finesse in interpersonal behavior in order to ensure the necessary commitment of all stakeholders to the purpose, goals and values of the collective. Through broad forums of participatory action, leaders need to clarify and align the interests of all stakeholders and, thereby, generate the requisite social and human capital

resources (such as *trust* and *commitment*) necessary for the achievement of the goals of the stakeholder community.

To develop these skills in participants, leadership educators will need to follow a 'grounded' theoretical framework (action-informed-theory) that addresses the processes of:

- creating shared purpose
- achieving a negotiated order (or 'constitution' that outlines the principles of power management within the stakeholder community)
- achieving focused commitment from all stakeholders (by generating strong identity resources within the community)
- aligning organizational design with purpose (selecting a structure that facilitates the attainment of organizational purpose rather than one that unwittingly inhibits its achievement)
- creating and re-creating culture (as the purpose, and thus the design, of the organization changes within rapidly changing global and local operational contexts).

Although much of the leadership literature addresses these issues in theory, it will require the intelligent use of relevant cases studies to make explicit the procedural knowledge required to address them effectively in practice. Particularly necessary, and critical to the successful management of the organizational structure/culture issues, is a clear understanding of the business model of the enterprise and its implications for the empowerment of stakeholders [see, for example, the distinction made by Bolman & Deal, (2003: 56-67) between the respective business models of McDonalds and Harvard University and the implications of these models for the strategic leadership of each of these organizations]. In executive leadership courses and part-time MBA programs, participants can be assigned an assessment task that requires them to form an action team at their workplace in order to address an existing strategic issue. Embedded in such work-based projects are processes (such as the formation of the team, the clarification of its mission, the negotiation of a set of values upon which to base its everyday action and the identification of an appropriate form of power management) that effectively integrate leadership theory and practice as they relate to this key theme.

3.4. Leading-In-Action

In the turbulent and competitive global economic context of current times, the role of leadership in maintaining the focus of all stakeholders on ‘what really matters’, or mission accomplishment, requires far more active and energetic participation of leaders in the everyday action of their operational contexts, than was the case a few decades ago. Leaders need to be far more visible (‘walk the talk’), audible (‘talk the talk’) and knowledgeable (with especially strong procedural and strategic knowledge bases) if they are to identify emergent strategic pathways, break down operational barriers, and read strategic inflection points in the environment (Puffer, 1999). In order to keep everyday practices and assumptions aligned with purpose, leaders need to ‘work with culture’ continuously, transforming mental models that are inappropriate to the *strategic core* of the organization. Three aspects of leadership education are especially relevant to the task of effective *leading-in-action*:

- *Governance Structures*: As Gardner (1965) makes clear, leadership education needs to confront the problems of hubris, defensiveness, and deceit from which leaders are not immune, especially under pressure, and that may distort their reading of personal and professional leadership situations:

When organizations are not meeting the challenge of change, it is as a rule not because they can’t *solve* their problems but because they won’t *see* their problems; not because they don’t *know* their faults, but because *they rationalize them as virtues or necessities* (quoted in Sarason, 1972: 250-251).

During times of stress leaders, just like other people, are likely to resort to mental models developed early in life that may be inappropriate to the task with which they have been charged by the organization. The levels of stress, and the potential distractions, generated by the challenging competitive and politico-economic environment of a globalizing world are too great to expect leaders to manage them effectively without supporting governance structures. Leadership education, thus, needs to expose participants to a range of ways, formal and informal, through which leaders can keep themselves ‘honest and mission-focused’. While formal governance structures have received much coverage in business schools in recent times, the introduction of participants to forms of personal support that can assist them in leading with integrity, and managing the human frailties that may emerge under pressure, seems to have been restricted to executive coaching services. While there is a place for executive coaching as a means to improving leadership practice, the commercial nature of such services makes it difficult for executive coaches to address directly some of the more personal dimensions of individual

performance. More useful in this respect is Sarason's (1972: 250) concept of an 'external critic' which he defines as:

someone (or a group) who ... is *not* a member of the setting (but) an outsider, independent, knowledgeable about, and sympathetic to the purposes of the setting; ... (who) makes a long-term commitment and regularly spends time in the setting in whatever ways necessary to gain knowledge and understanding; ... (and whose) relationship to the setting is explicitly based on (an) agreement that his ... obligation is not to any individual, but to the purposes and values of the setting.

In his study of successful new settings, Sarason (1972) found that the most successful leaders had access to an external critic who was independent of the setting and its leadership; whom the leaders respected; and who offered them honest critique on their leadership actions. This resource proved to be a significant differentiator in the situation of successful and unsuccessful leaders. However, and this point could be the subject of class debate, he found that once an organization achieved success, arrogance set in and many leaders became intolerant of the critique of the external critic. In most of the cases studied by Sarason, the collapse of the relationship between the leaders and the external critic marked the beginning of the decline of the fortunes of the organization (for a relevant case study on the functioning of an external critic as a key leadership resource, see Dovey & White, 2004).

• *Incentive Systems.* In order to maintain collective focus upon 'what really matters' (mission accomplishment), leaders need to ensure absolute clarity throughout the organization on what constitutes everyday mission-pertinent performance and on how it is measured and rewarded. Secondly, incentives need to be significant to be effective. Business schools need look no further than the classic Lincoln Electric case (Harvard University, 1983) on the power of an effective incentive system in keeping all stakeholders focused on the organization's mission.

• *Learning Methodologies.* In emergent operational realities, the capacity of organizations to learn from action (to generate action-informed-theory) is critical to their success (Senge, 1990; Davies, 1993). Leadership education thus needs to cover a range of learning methodologies that include action research and action learning, in order to develop frames of reference in participants with respect to the vital role that leadership plays in encouraging, sponsoring and rewarding everyday learning practices within an organization. If learning, creativity and knowledge are social capital resources that are embedded in relationships between stakeholders then collaborative work practices are critical to the leveraging of the potential learning-from-action in organizations (Leonard-Barton, 1995;

Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Of particular importance to leaders is the role of organizational structure with respect to the facilitation or inhibition of individual and collective learning. Often the choice of organizational structure is, in effect, a choice of possible sources and types of learning within an organization. Awareness of this phenomenon can be achieved in leadership education through a comparison of the learning outcomes gained by participants from work-based assessment tasks that are conducted within different organizational structures and/or industry-based forums. By focusing the academic assessment of these tasks on the degree to which participants are able to convert the tacit knowledge generated by work-based experience into explicit, abstract leadership principles, the relationship between various forms of experience (and the tacit learning and knowledge bases gained from them) and the organizational structures that predetermine them, becomes evident to participants. For leaders, this realization is especially important to their task of knowledge construction in that, through their structuring of the everyday work experience of staff, leaders facilitate (or inhibit) the development of mission-critical procedural and strategic knowledge within organizations.

Work-based projects are also an effective method of facilitating participant awareness of the various factors that influence leadership success and failure. As such, work-based projects enable participants to view leadership failure not as something to be defensive and possibly deceitful about but, rather, as a valuable learning experience – as an opportunity to become aware of the individual and collective mental models that contribute to leadership failure/success; to gain new insights into the role of key leadership phenomena, such as *power management*, *organizational structure and culture*, and *strategy* in organizational outcomes; and to learn the value of converting the tacit knowledge gained from experience in a leadership role into explicitly documented strategic frameworks that can guide subsequent leadership experience in organizations. Similarly, by focusing the academic assessment on the documentation of the general leadership principles gained from such work-based experience (rather than the success or failure of the project) participants are encouraged to be honest about the outcomes of these endeavors (individually and collectively) and to recognize the educational value in analyzing everyday leadership experience and in making explicit the key learning to be gained from the analysis of leadership practice.

3.5. Organizational Renewal and Sustained Performance

In rapidly changing competitive environments, every aspect of the life of an organization should be open to change. Such change, however, cannot be

arbitrary but should be the consequence of collective scrutiny and analysis. It may be, as was the case of Lincoln Electric in the early 1990s when its attempts to globalize without questioning the mental models that had underpinned its mission in the USA for one hundred years almost destroyed the organization (see Hastings, 1999), that the mission of the organization needs to change in spite of a long and successful history. Similarly, in the domain of organizational form and strategy, Peters (2003) and Zuboff & Maxmin (2002) argue strongly that the 'enterprise logic' of current business operations is woefully out-of-touch with the psychological, sociological and political realities of the first decade of the 21st Century, and that renewal in this arena is the pre-eminent challenge of current business leaders. Teaching the leadership processes involved in renewal will involve a deep scrutiny of the concept of power and the organizational factors (such as ownership and structure) and personal factors (such as the self-interest of those who have control over decision-making in organizations) that influence the exercise of power. As an example of the role of power in renewal, the ambivalence of many business leaders towards innovation, in spite of their rhetoric to the contrary, is well documented (see, for example, Foster & Kaplan, 2001). Innovation in the technical arena is seldom resisted in organizations as generally it cements the power of those in authority. Innovation in terms of organizational structure, strategy and work practices, however, is a far more political process and will be resisted by those who benefit from the *status quo* even if these changes offer significant business benefits to the organization [see Fenech and Dovey (2004) for a case study that highlights this assertion]. Such innovation often requires those with power in organizations to sponsor the transformation of their own power bases within the organization – a challenge that only the few who are absolutely secure-in-themselves will accept.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, three general claims can be used to explore the issue of organizational renewal through class debate:

- *Owner-led organizations are generally far more open to innovation and renewal than those led by salaried CEOs* [see O'Toole (1996) for examples of this in his attempt to identify the 'Rushmorean leaders' of American business].

There is a simple reason for the general truth of this statement – owners have far more than money to gain from the success of their organizations. Their organization is a manifestation of their identity, social heritage, pride, and many other aspects of their lives. Their commitment to its sustained success is thus based on deep psycho-social needs that motivate them to risk changing purpose and strategies that may have been successful in the past, in the interests of renewal and potentially sustainable success in the future. On the

other hand, salaried CEOs, whose remuneration packages are tied to their positions of authority, are generally unlikely to risk these packages on organizational transformations that may well put at risk the bases of their own power.

- *One of the key leadership tasks is to release the entrepreneurial talent that exists within an organization* (Foster & Kaplan, 2001).

This statement should introduce a debate about the role of *intrepreneurship* (see Pinchot, 1985) as a key source of renewal in organizations. Intrepreneurs are 'internal' visionaries who are prepared to threaten organizational renewal and the re-alignment of organizational purpose and practices in changed operational circumstances. They are hands-on doers who develop the procedural and strategic knowledge required to manage the politics of implementation of their vision. Intrepreneurs have a strong internal locus of control – they see their situation as a function of their abilities, drive, tenacity and creativity – and are willing to risk their jobs in their quest to transform the organization.

This claim introduces the possibility of leaders having to take on a 'revolutionary' role at times whereby they will have to contest and/or violate policies that, from their perspective, threaten the organization's long-term interests. In such cases, the new vision for the organization that they offer is likely to be one that will turn the *status quo* on its head and is, therefore, one that will be resisted by those who hold power within the organization with all the means at their disposal. Thus this claim opens up for debate the complex leadership dilemma of whether leaders at critical times in the history of an organization/collective have to risk themselves in order to address its renewal and, if so, at what cost. The issue of *courage* – central to any leadership endeavor – will emerge and with it, the role of commitment in the exercising of leadership. Whether it is as Martin Luther King stated, that he only became a real leader when he lost his fear of death, or whether it is the intrepreneur in an organization who is prepared to lose her/his job in the service of a new vision for the organization, courage is the foundation of real leadership. At some point in the exercise, participants could be asked to consider the number of leaders throughout history who were incarcerated, assassinated or murdered because of the unpopularity of the ideas or vision that they espoused, with powerful elites whose interests were invested in maintaining the political *status quo* (Heifetz, 1994, is a useful reference on this point).

- *Leadership is a function of followership: mission-effective leadership depends on informed, courageous and challenging followership* (Bennis, 1993).

As Berg (1998) comments, the issue of followership is seldom covered in leadership education and yet, as history has shown, followers get the leaders they tolerate. Several points can be raised in a debate on this issue:

- o Followers have an obligation to serve the purpose (mission) of the organization and not the purpose of the leader (and, as current times show, the alignment of these should not be assumed).
- o What options do followers have when the behavior of the leader(s) is putting the mission of the organization at risk?
- o Does effective followership also have its foundation in courage and, if so, is the identification of one's sources of courage an imperative for followers and leaders alike?

A case study of Nelson Mandela (see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2003) is a useful resource in this respect, in that Mandela demonstrates the same courage as a follower as he did as a leader. In spite of African cultural norms against the criticism of a leader, Mandela consistently critiques the South African president Thabo Mbeki and the ANC government with respect to their handling of the Aids crisis in South Africa; their tolerance of the constitutional and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe; and their neglect of principles as serious as the failure to confront government corruption and as personal as respect for the time of others (time-keeping). In his role as follower, Mandela is a constant and public reminder to all that the personal purpose of leaders is to serve the mission of the collective. Where these differ, a crisis in leadership and followership is likely to emerge.

4. Conclusion

Given its dependence upon relevant frames of experience that are scarce and not easily accessible, leadership education in business school contexts necessarily challenges conventional pedagogical practices. To be successful it demands creative curriculum design; multi-disciplinary content; a broad range of teaching/learning strategies; considerable diversity of staff and students; and a variety of teaching and learning locations.

In my exploration of five potential generic themes for leadership education in business schools, I have suggested pedagogical strategies through which

deep stakeholder relationships can be built; global leadership frames of reference can be developed; self-awareness with respect to the personal dimensions of leadership can be exercised; and life-long learning, through the scrutiny and analysis of everyday leadership action, can be practiced.

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