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Leadership Development: Theory and Practice in LEAD New York

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What is the Issue?

Leadership Development Programs (LDPs) provide training and educational opportunities for existing and emerging leaders. However, many LDPs lack a theoretical framework or foundation, resulting in interventions that are often haphazard in their implementation. In addition, many leadership theories are abstract, their concepts are not adequately explained, and they are not developed using issues facing real-world organizational leaders. This often means that they are of little or no use to practitioners. This gap between theory and practice has contributed to practitioner mistrust of the processes and outcomes of basic leadership research. As an illustration of how the theory-practice gap can be addressed, this *Brief* describes the process followed for developing the theoretical framework for the LEAD New York leadership development program.

One Model: The LEAD New York Program

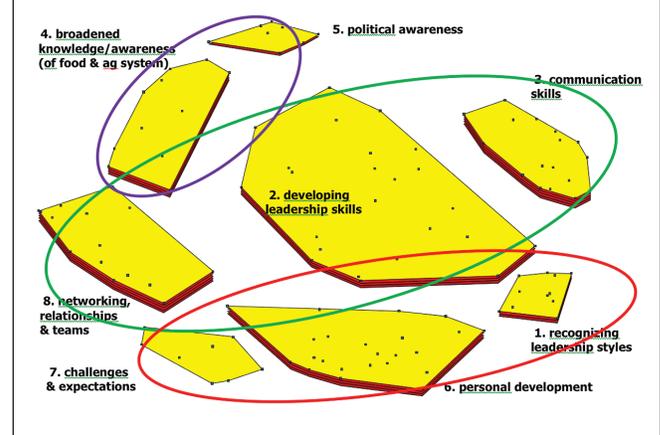
LEAD New York (LEADNY) is a two-year LDP for professionals in the food and agricultural industry in New York State and the surrounding region. The program's mission is "to inspire and develop leaders for the food and agricultural industry". Since 1985, 12 cohorts and 344 individuals have successfully completed the program, with approximately one third of class members coming from the production agricultural sector (i.e. farmers), one third from the for-profit agribusiness sector, and one third from the government, education, or not-for-profit sectors.

The entire program is approximately 50 days in length. Participants meet for an average of three days per month from October through April in each of the program's two years, and they participate in a lengthier study trip in the second year. Sessions include lectures by outside speakers, discussions, tours, small group activities and class member presentations. Outside work (e.g. reading, preparation for presentations, team assignments) is also expected. In addition to organized instructional activities, participants share lodging accommodations, dine, and travel together. These informal interactions help develop strong relationship bonds.

Developing a Theoretical Framework

A structured conceptualization technique, Concept Mapping, was used to develop a theoretical framework for LEAD New York. A concept map is a way of representing relationships between ideas, in the same way that a road map represents the locations of highways and towns, and the connections between them. In order to generate the concepts used in the exercise, LEAD NY program alumni and board members had an active role in responding to the focus question: "One specific outcome of participation in a high-quality leadership development program is..." Participants identified specific outcomes, conceptualized the relationships between outcomes, rated the importance and feasibility of outcomes, and interpreted the data generated.

Figure 1: Concept mapping results for LEAD NY: Clusters (by importance), regions (ovals) and statement points identified.



Results of the Analysis

The concept mapping exercise identified 117 specific outcomes organized into eight distinct constructs and three regions (regions are groups of closely related constructs, see Figure 1). Relationships between constructs were explored, as

were participant ratings of importance and feasibility. Each dot in the figure represents a specific outcome statement, identified by its own number. Each construct is identified by a yellow polygon and a corresponding label. Layers (shown in red) for each polygon represent the relative importance of that construct (more layers = more important). The ovals represent the underlying regions of constructs: the “knowledge/awareness” region in *purple*, the “skills” region in *green* and the “reflection” region in *red*. For example, the *networking, relationships, and teams* cluster of outcomes – within the broader region of skill development – was found to be the most important set of program outcomes. A brief summary of each of the clusters is provided, in order of its ranked importance.

Networking, relationships, and teams. Cluster 8 emerged as most important, and included such general outcomes as teambuilding, improved interpersonal skills, and developing personal and professional networks. Given that networking opportunities build peer relationships across functional areas, leading to the creation of additional social capital, this cluster may be legitimately thought of as the social capital building cluster.

Communication skills. The communication skills cluster (cluster 3) ranked second in importance. Containing skill-related outcomes, this cluster mostly pertains to communication (e.g. public speaking, listening).

Broadened knowledge/awareness (of food and agriculture system). Clusters 4 and 6 were tied in their importance ranking. As one board member said during the interpretation session cluster 4 “describes the ‘playing field’; the environment in which our leaders must operate and issues they must understand”.

Personal development. Several statements in cluster 6 were related to improved self-confidence, but unlike the communication skills cluster, these referred to an overall improvement in participant confidence to take on leadership roles or face previously intimidating challenges. Self-reflection also emerged as an important theme in this cluster.

Developing leadership skills. Centrally located in the overall cluster map, nearly every statement in cluster 2 had high bridging values. Bridging values denote the level of inter-relatedness between outcomes, suggesting that cluster 2 is connected to every other cluster around it. Unlike the communication skills and networking, relationships and teams clusters (which identify skills in more specific domains) this cluster was identified by one board member as the “miscellaneous” skills cluster. This cluster identified several specific skill outcomes (e.g. better time management and knowing how to dress appropriately). These specific skills, however, are generally rated as less important than broader (though less well-defined) skill domains.

Recognizing leadership styles. Whereas cluster 6 (personal development) was more inwardly-directed (i.e. reflective),

cluster 1 is more outwardly-directed (i.e. considering how other people lead). Important statements within this cluster generally identified outcomes like developing leadership in others and learning from the leadership styles of others.

Political awareness. Like cluster 4, the political awareness cluster identified a knowledge domain, but cluster 5 was specific to the legislative process and political environment that leaders must operate in. It ranked as the second least important cluster of outcomes.

Challenges and expectations. Cluster 7 was ranked as the least important cluster. During the statement generation process, a few participants identified a small number of potentially negative outcomes of participation in an LDP (e.g. “difficulties in balancing time away from home, family, etc.”). This cluster is where most of those negative outcomes were sorted.

Conclusions: LEAD New York’s Program Theory

A theoretical framework for the LEAD New York Program clearly emerged from the concept mapping exercise. The eight major constructs feature prominently in its design and implementation. LEADNY defines *leadership* as a social influence process resulting in change. The program improves participants’ leadership skills through an experiential education/action learning process that includes instruction, practice, feedback and reflection. Skills that are developed include a) network-, relationship-, and team-building skills, b) communication skills, and c) other skills (e.g. critical thinking) useful in leadership processes. These skills were all rated as important in the concept mapping exercise. By improving their competency in these skill areas, participants become more effective at influencing others to bring about change in organizations. Participants also develop a broader knowledge/awareness of relevant issues, within the food and agricultural industry, and to a lesser extent the public policy arena, which serves as the context in which this leadership development takes place. Outcomes go beyond mere skill improvement, however. The program builds social capital, a resource that can be drawn upon long after completion of the program. Participants learn to appreciate diversity, gain confidence in their leadership abilities, and are often inspired to serve in leadership roles. In addition, participants realize the importance of life-long learning, practice ongoing reflection, and seek out new opportunities to continue their leadership development. Grounding the LEAD New York Program in a well-developed theoretical framework has resulted in a truly successful experience for its participants, and a model for other community development leadership programs to follow.

CaRDI is sponsoring a conference for leadership development professionals June 7-8 in Syracuse, NY. For more information please visit: www.cals.cornell.edu/cals/devsoc/outreach/cardi/calendar-events/state-of-upstate-ny.cfm

