

White Paper

Driving Leadership Development with Positivity

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Key Points:

- Some of the greatest gains in leadership development occur when instruction focuses on improving people's existing strengths.
- A positive development cycle emerges when prior learning sets the foundation for future learning, and future learning builds on and reinforces prior learning.
- Positive relationships facilitate leadership development by establishing a context that enables people to learn about themselves, creates a safe environment for experimenting with new forms of the self, and provides a secure base for mutual learning and development.

Introduction

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) concerns the study of phenomena associated with what individuals and organizations aspire to be when they are at their very best. Leadership is one such phenomenon. Cameron (2008) suggests that leadership is most effective and most likely to enable extraordinary performance when individuals accentuate what is right, what is inspiring, and what is good in organizations. If we adopt this positive view of leadership, the fundamental question with respect to leadership development is as follows: How can organizations develop a leadership capacity that enables people to reach their full potential and fosters extraordinary performance that exceeds expectations? Adopting a POS perspective establishes the foundation for three new insights related to the leadership development process: 1) the value of a strengths-based approach, 2) the cyclical nature of leadership development and the need to understand positive development cycles, and 3) the role of positive relationships in leadership development.

Strengths-Based Leadership Development:

POS is grounded in an affirmative bias that results in a focus on enhancing strengths, affirming human potential, and maintaining a positive orientation toward what is right (as opposed to overcoming obstacles or deficiencies). Applying an affirmative bias to leadership development implies that:

- It is more effective to frame individuals' positive qualities, existing strengths, and past successes as opportunities for building on what is already excellent, as opposed to focusing on their existing liabilities and problem
- Some of the greatest gains in human development occur when training and development are targeted not at addressing people's deficiencies, but at improving what they already do well

A strengths-based approach stands in stark contrast to the existing literature on leadership development, which emphasizes the developmental value of on-the-job experiences that are inherently stressful and unpleasant. According to adult learning theories, experience-based learning occurs when an individual's routines and thought patterns are disrupted by a novel experience, causing the individual to reassess and modify existing knowledge structures, approaches, and processes. Negative experiences such as setbacks and hardships can certainly disrupt existing routines and structures, but positive experiences also can provide a stimulus for learning from experience, potentially without some of the negative consequences associated with hardship and trauma.

Positive development experiences:

- Stimulate learning by breaking existing thought patterns and routines

- Encourage individuals to create, consider, and work toward a more positive self-image
- Foster psychological safety, a context which encourages risk taking and personal growth
- Explain variation in leadership development above and beyond any effects associated with challenges and hardships

The POS perspective does not disregard the value of challenges, hardships, and setbacks in the leadership development process. to the contrary, it suggests that the developmental value of challenging hardships and setbacks can be enhanced by approaching, going through, and reflecting on negative experiences with a more positive orientation. When framed in more positive terms, individuals enter into the experience with not only higher efficacy for the task, but also a clearer sense of what strengths and talents they could build from and utilize to learn and grow as leaders.

Positive Development Cycles in Leadership Development

The holy grail of leadership development is the construction of a positive cycle of development whereby prior learning sets the foundation for future learning, and future learning builds upon and reinforces prior learning. For example, in the process construction of a leader identity, by which individuals come to see “leader” as part of their personal identity:

- A positive development cycle emerges when an individual behaves in ways that are consistent with a leader identity, and in turn, others within the social context respond to that person’s behavior in ways that support and reinforce the individual’s leader identity
- A negative development cycle can be created when an individual’s claim of a leader identity is not supported and reinforced by others, e.g., when others openly challenge a person’s right to leadership

Three conditions are essential to creating a positive development cycle in leadership development:

1. Reinforcing nature-to-development experiences:

In order to fully internalize lessons of experience, they must be reinforced through repetition over time and across experiences. When experiences are linked and reinforce each other, a positive development cycle will emerge.

2. Presence of positive emotions:

Positive emotions widen the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind and are considered in any given situation. For example, positive emotions such as joy create an urge to challenge existing routines, norms, and organizational boundaries, and often can lead to increased creativity. In the context of leadership development, positive emotions:

- Promote experimenting with new ways of leading or novel approaches to dealing with leadership challenges, which are central to learning and development
- Create an urge to explore, to take in new information, and to reassess current beliefs; these behaviors increase people’s preferences for variety and broaden their array of acceptable behavioral options
- Act as resources that can be drawn upon to facilitate positive development cycles

3. Climate of compassion in the organization:

Even though setbacks and failures can be a source of learning and growth, people tend to focus on the negatives of difficult experiences and overlook the lessons that could be derived. As they begin to define themselves by their failures, their efficacy for leadership decreases, their identity as a leader weakens, and a negative development cycle is created. A climate of compassion can offset the negative effects of challenges at work. Such a climate is characterized by people who recognize that others are experiencing some sort of negative state, can empathize with their negative attitudes and feelings, and can then respond in ways that help people not only overcome the negatives, but also strengthen their functional capacity

- In compassionate organizations, individuals are more likely to have colleagues who recognize their struggles and who are ready to respond in ways that help facilitate learning and growth (e.g., through feedback, mentoring, coaching, training, and providing resources).
- A climate of compassion provides people with a resource they can use to build upon and reinforce their developmental experiences, which creates a positive development cycle.

Positive Relationships and Connections

A positive relationship is one in which there is a true sense of mutuality and relatedness, such that people experience mutual giving and receiving, caring, and safety in challenging times. One mechanism through which positive relationships facilitate leadership development is by establishing a context that enables people to learn about themselves. This creates a safe environment for experimenting with new forms of the self and provides a secure base for mutual learning and development.

- A sense of mutuality provides the support and motivation for the construction and growth of positive relational identities. This is the foundation in the creation of leadership relationships.
- Mutuality reduces the likelihood that people in a leadership relationship experience identity threats or conflict over leader and follower identities. Rather, a sense of mutuality enables people to co-create reinforcing identities as leader and follower, and through this process generate a mutually reinforcing cycle of development that leads to high-quality leadership relationships.

The purpose and meaning originating from positive relationships can also help enable and facilitate leadership development in organizations. Individuals look to other people for validation in relation to the importance of the tasks they perform and the roles they assume. Such validation offers reinforcement that one's role in the organization is valued and that individuals are contributing to a meaningful and socially valued purpose.

- Positive relationships that provide validation and reinforcement link people to a larger purpose and motivate them to take on more leadership-like roles in service of that purpose.
- The emergence of clear, well-defined leadership identities and relationships will facilitate growth and development in the organization's leadership capacity.

Conclusion:

By looking beyond the hardships people face to consider more positive developmental experiences, a POS perspective brings into focus questions about how leadership development processes can build upon people's current leadership capacities and strengths in ways that foster the creation and growth of new leadership capacities. POS informs our understanding of the dynamics in leadership development through the emergence and construction of positive development cycles and high-quality connections.

Take Action:

- ✓ Frame staff's positive qualities, existing strengths, and past successes as opportunities for building on what already is excellent. Target training/development at further improving these factors.
- ✓ Approach negative experiences with a positive orientation to enhance their developmental value
- ✓ Respond to others' behavior in ways that support and reinforce their leadership identity.
- ✓ Link and reinforce positive experiences over time and across experiences to foster positive development cycles.
- ✓ Recognize others' struggles and respond through feedback, mentoring, coaching, training, and providing resources.
- ✓ Cultivate positive relationships with others, characterized by mutual giving and receiving, caring, and safety in challenging times.
- ✓ Give frequent feedback about the positive contribution or impact your colleagues have on others.
- ✓ Validate and link people to a larger purpose to motivate them to take on more leadership-like identities.

* This paper was summarized by Penelope Mallinckrodt (Ross MBA '13) based on chapter 60 of Cameron and Spreitzer's (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2012).

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