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The Makeover: A Leadership Development Training Intervention in Higher Education

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Abstract

Though there is abundant research available about leadership practices, the empirical literature focusing on studies about the impact of leadership training programs remains scarce. The present study addresses this gap in the literature and aims at evaluating a leadership training intervention with the aim to raise academic leaders' awareness to adopt transformational leadership. Leaders from one public university were involved in a six-week leadership development training program. Qualitative analysis of interviews, taken before and after the intervention, helped to develop a picture of changes in transformational leadership behaviours. There is a clear impact of the intervention. Compared to the pre-intervention interviews we observe consistent increase in awareness for all six transformational leadership behaviours. These results are discussed in view of follow-up studies in a broader research context.

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Keywords: Intervention; Academic leaders, Transformational leadership; Higher education; Intervention study; Qualitative study.

1. Introduction

Among the other challenges in higher education, authors present leadership development as one of the most crucial challenges for the future (Bolden et al., 2012). Brown already stated in 2001 that the changes in quality requirements, demands from the public, funding agencies, new technological demands, ... requires "leaders who thrive on the challenge of change" (p.312).

The current state calls for leadership that supports the transformation of organisations to be able to tackle the changes in higher education. This accounts for our rationale to put forward a focus on

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transformational leadership. An empirical study design was set up to evaluate the impact of the intervention involving leaders from a public university in Pakistan.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Leadership development programs

Both theory and practice suggest the need for leadership development programs. Higher education especially in developing countries - face growing pressure to ensure high-quality teaching and learning outcomes (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2014). Within higher education, leadership development programs, therefore, reach a critical level of importance (Madsen, 2012). Ruben (2004) writes in this context: "leaders with extraordinary capabilities are needed to help the institution meet these challenges" (p. 288).

There is growing literature focusing on leadership development (Stigmar, 2008), mainly stresses the multidimensional leadership development process, and points at potential ways to enhance and study leadership development (Day & Harrison, 2007). This is in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the need for leadership development. Training duration, approaches and target participants are crucial in leadership development programs. In his seminal paper, Conger (1993); McCall (2004) stressed the systematic training programs.

2.2 Interventions focusing on leadership development in higher education

The literature is lacking when it comes to train leaders in higher education. Authors suggest higher education should learn from the corporate sector while adopting a more entrepreneurial outlook (Davies, Hides, & Casey, 2001; Kulati, 2003). In this context, the focus on leadership development has been reinforced by Brown (2001), who states "leadership development is an underutilized strategy in higher education" (p.313). Collins and Holton III (2004); Steinert, Naismith, and Mann (2012) identified in their review of higher education leadership training approaches between 1985 and 2010; only 19 studies focused on 14 interventions with leadership as a primary focus. Considering this gap between theory and practice, the current research article addresses this gap and studies the impact of a leadership development intervention in a higher education context.

2.3 Transformational leadership in academic organisations

Plenty of literature is available discussing leadership styles (DuBrin, 2012). In this study, we focus on transformational leadership. Empirical research also shows a significant amount of interest in transformational leadership with respect to leadership development (Dinh et al., 2014).

Transformational leadership is a multidimensional concept. But most approaches share the perspective that effective leaders transform the organisations. The essence of transformational leadership as described by Brown (2001), "this type of leaders (…) thrive due to the challenge of change; foster an environment of innovation; encourage trust and learning and (..) can lead themselves, their constituents and units, departments and universities successfully into the future" (p.312). In this context, Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (1990) presented six behaviours concerning transformational

leadership: articulating a vision, providing an appropriate model, fostering the acceptance of group goals, high-performance expectations, providing individualized support, and intellectual stimulation.

Articulating a vision; looking for new opportunities, projecting a vision for the future, knowing the directions that will be taken, being articulated and inspiring, and getting others behind the mission (Kouzes & Posner, 1995b).

Providing an appropriate model; setting an example, leading by doing (rather than telling), being a good role model (Kouzes & Posner, 1995a).

Fostering the acceptance of group goals; promoting group cooperation and teamwork gets the team behind the same goal, develops a team spirit (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

High-performance expectations; behaviour that demonstrates the leader's expectations for excellence, quality, and high performance on the part of followers (Podsakoff et al., 1990).

Providing individualized support; considering others' feelings, respecting others, being thoughtful about others (Bass, 1985a).

Intellectual stimulation; leader intends to increase followers' interest in and awareness of problems, developing their ability and inclination to think about problems in new ways (Bass, 1985b).

3. Research design

3.1 Research question

The study aimed at increasing the awareness of university leaders through a leadership training program based on transformational leadership. We put forward the following research question: *To what extent will an experimental intervention, inducing reflection on behaviours of transformational leadership, significantly increase related awareness in university leaders in Pakistan?*

3.2 Procedure

The earlier survey results (Zulfqar, Valcke, Devos, Tuytens, & Shahzad, 2016), help to determine the nature of leadership in Pakistani universities. The nature of leadership is transformational to some extent. To strengthen academic leadership, we have developed a training program for university leaders to strengthen their personal awareness about transformational leadership behaviours in their faculties/departments. An empirical study was set-up to explore changes in their TL-behaviours before and after the intervention. Semi-structured interviews were designed, based on the six behaviours of transformational leadership. All participants were interviewed before and after the intervention. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the first interview after giving information about the nature of the study, the way data would be treated and the fact the interview was being audiotaped.

Taking into account the engagement of the leaders we divided the sample into two groups and conducted one session per week for each group. Overall, six training sessions, each lasting two hours, were set up by the first and the second author of this article. The training sessions were defined on the base of an in-depth literature review about the six TL-behaviours. Each training session focused on a particular TL-behaviour. Next to the conceptual base, concrete examples and cases were added that fit

the Pakistan university setting and that had been collected during earlier survey studies (Zulfqar et al., 2016) involving Pakistan leaders. The problem solution was carried out with the Metaplan technique (Metaplan, 2000). In addition, during each session, leaders were involved in role-playing, and they could listen to exemplary audio clips, (recorded during earlier survey studies) (Zulfqar et al., 2016) from other leaders discussing a particular TL-behaviour. At the end of each session, a video-clip was presented to round-off the session.

3.3 Sample

In an earlier study, a stratified sample was defined, building on a total of 34 private and 50 public universities situated in Punjab, one of the main provinces of Pakistan (Zulfqar et al., 2016). From this sample, one public university was selected to be involved in this intervention study. This university was chosen at random. In total, 15 leaders were invited to participate - from three different faculties. Only, nine participants could take part in all six sessions, due to their working agendas.

The average age of the respondents was 45-60; the average years of experience was 10-30. The participants assumed a range of leadership roles and responsibilities at the faculty (dean) and on a departmental level (head of the department). The names of the participants and the university were re-coded to ensure anonymity.

3.4 Data collection

As stated above, a semi-structured interview was designed based on the six TL-behaviours. All the participants were interviewed before and after the intervention. All interviews were audiotaped in view of the analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

Building on the methodology as suggested by Matthew, Miles, and Huberman (1994), each interview was transcribed verbatim in view of the analysis. WeftQDA (2004) was used to manage the data. The researcher coded all transcripts. A content analysis was carried out, to determine the content units for analysis based on the six behaviours of transformational leadership. A deductive method was adopted to develop a category matrix. Next, the interview data were reviewed for interpretation of and reflection on the identified categories related to each TL-behaviour (Polit & Beck, 2004).

The analysis focused on identifying differences before and after the intervention. The findings of the study are presented in a quantitative form. Following the study design and analysis, the coded data can be compared meaningfully using frequencies and percentages of codes (Curtis et al., 2001). To check the reliability of the coding a second researcher coded all nine transcripts; the resulting inter-rater reliability was 94% (Matthew et al., 1994).

4. Results

We structure this result section by first looking at the general picture that could be developed prior to the intervention. In relation to this “baseline,” we indicate what leaders mainly point at in relation to each TL-behaviour. Next, we describe what leaders stress after the intervention.

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4.1 Pre-intervention results

Before the training intervention, the interview data reflect a - basic - awareness in leaders about all six TL-behaviours. We will emphasise the categories observed in most leaders' responses.

Articulating a vision; two out of five categories – as identified in the literature – dominate the leader responses, envisioning the future for their teachers (53.85%). On the other hand, articulating the vision is stressed to a lesser extent (28.20%). Hardly any indicators were identified that reflect the following categories: goal clarity (10.26%), task focus (5.13%), and positive energy in the followers (2.56%). We can conclude that in connection to this TL-behaviour, this baseline is less developed in the leaders involved in this research.

The following quote clearly depicts these results:

> 'If a leader has an exposure then his vision will be broader too. He can set an inspiring vision for his department with the help of his extensive experience.' (BZF3H4)

Providing an appropriate role model; the results of this TL behaviour are based on the four categories as identified in the literature. The majority of the leaders stressed a leader has to set the standards about how to treat people (37.14%). Likewise, leaders stressed the importance to set an example for others (31.43%). The other two categories were hardly identified in the interviews: setting high standards for oneself (20%) and setting the standards to pursue the goals (4%).

High-performance expectations; five categories were identified in the literature related to this behaviour. Most leaders (31.70%) believe in giving and taking feedback. A significant amount of leaders expect the best performance (29.26%) from their colleagues. Leaders (24.40%) emphasised that before setting the high- performance expectations for colleagues a leader must provide them with clear directions to achieve the set objectives. As to the other two categories, the responses are given to a lesser extent: appreciation/encouragement (2.44%) and giving them the confidence to achieve the goals (12.20%). To conclude, leaders do not set standards to the nature of this high performance.

Fostering the acceptance of group goals; two categories were identified in relation to this behaviour. The majority of the leaders (60%) promote collaboration among their teachers. Interview data revealed that (40%) of the leaders develop joint strategies to achieve the shared goals. But this collaboration is limited to administrative tasks only.

One of the leaders said:

> 'If you ask about administrative tasks, I would say yes, they do. But in science disciplines, you cannot put constraints on the faculty members to work together.' (BZF1H4)

Providing individualized support; we find responses related to three categories. Interview data reflected that (43.19%) provide socio/emotional support to their colleagues. Many leaders also stressed open lines of communication (36.36%) with their colleagues. A few responses from the leaders (20.45%) foster a supportive relationship with their colleagues. Overall they are not clear about how to offer support to the faculty members.

Intellectual stimulation; four categories were identified as relating to this behaviour. The majority of leaders appreciate their faculty members (40.55%). Up to 21.63% of the interview fragments are

related to reward/prize. The leaders somewhat emphasised to invoke creativity in their teachers (16.21%). Interview data hardly showed responses as to providing a conducive working environment (5.40%). Overall, key elements of this TL-behaviour are not well represented in leader input.

4.2 Post-intervention results

Articulating a vision; in this section, we report the post-intervention results in relation to each TL-behaviour. Post-intervention results show an increase in their awareness level about all five categories as identified in the literature. Some leaders laid stress on envisioning the future (18.18%); as to the next category to achieve the goals (33.77%), many leaders stressed goal clarity (24.67%); several leaders emphasise task focus (16.88%). Only one category in this TL-behaviour was observed to a lesser extent: positive energy in the followers (6.50%). Following interview fragments could help to judge the increase in their awareness level.

One of the leaders explained this behaviour as follows:

> 'I challenge my teachers from time to time, to keep them focused to achieve the vision. In doing so, teachers do not get lazy, and they do not forget the goals and objectives of the department. If you do not remind them of the targets, then they will forget all about them. In the end, you will not achieve anything.' (BZF3H2)

This suggests a marked increase in their awareness level after the intervention (N 77 as compared to 39).

Providing an appropriate role model; prior to the intervention, leaders were not clear about how they could be a role model for their teachers, which changed however after the intervention. The majority of the leaders (40%) emphasised on *leader setting an example* for his colleagues. Many leaders considered *setting high standards for oneself* (22%), some stressed on *setting the standard about how to treat people* (28%). Only one category was expressed to a lesser extent: *setting the standards to pursue goals* (10%). Overall, we observed a definite change in their awareness level (N 100 as compared to 35).

A leader explained this behaviour as such:

> 'Your positive behaviour matters a lot. If I am polite with my colleagues, and respond to them quickly, they will respect me. If any of the teachers is embarrassed or not performing well, do not insult him, and treat him with respect.' (BZUF2H2)

High-performance expectations; in view of high-performance expectations, the literature suggests that the leaders *provide clear directions* (19.38%) to their colleagues to perform best in their respective domains. Several leaders *expect the best from their colleagues* (27.55%). Few believe in *giving the confidence to achieve the goals* (12.25%). As to the next category (34.70%) of the leaders believe in *giving and taking feedback* (34.70%). After the intervention leaders were clear about that how they can give *appreciation/encouragement* (6.12%) to their teachers. The following interview fragments support our results.

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A leader explains:

> 'Without setting standards, you cannot expect the best from your colleagues. If we do not set or follow the standards, we will lose our position/ranking.' (BZF1H3)

Another leader said:

> 'Feedback is essential, however, the right way of giving and taking feedback both from teachers and students. The leaders should also provide feedback to their teachers on their performance, both formally and informally.' (BZF3H1)

The findings of high-performance expectations are interesting because – when – compared to the data prior to the training intervention, - leaders have clearly evolved and present a larger (N 98 as compared to 41) and richer variety of awareness elements.

Fostering the acceptance of group goals; the picture in relation to this behaviour has clearly changed. Leaders now emphasised how a leader can develop joint strategies to achieve the shared goals (50.70%). Next, leaders also stressed to promote the collaboration among teachers (49.30%). After the intervention, they are clearer about promoting the collaboration with their faculty/department.

One leader said:

> 'We had faced problems in exam supervisions. After attending the training, I realized the importance of shared work. We recently had exams in our department, and I constituted committees to work together and to help each other. Now, the exam system is more peaceful and efficient than before.' (BZF1H5)

After the intervention, interview data reflect an increase in the awareness level about this behaviour (N 71 as compared to 30).

Providing individualized support; a definite increase was observed in view of this behaviour. Leaders expressed a clear willingness to provide support and seemed ready to adopt a variety of ways in order to achieve this. For instance, a substantial amount of interview responses reflected leaders adopted open- line communication (35.86%). Interview data also revealed the leaders' input related to foster a supportive relationship with their colleagues (25%). Most of the leaders emphasised that they provide socio/emotional support to their teachers (39.14%).

Another example:

> 'I try to create an environment where my colleagues feel relaxed to say everything; they can share their problems with me. I always try to help them. I create a friendly environment. I am ultimately involved with them in their work.' (BZF1H2)

To sum up, after the intervention, the training seemed to have developed a new insight in relation to providing individualized support (N 92 as compared to 44).

Intellectual stimulation; post-intervention results showed awareness of giving the staff non-financial rewards to invoke intellectual stimulation. The majority of the leaders appreciate their teachers (24.47%); they also give them rewards/prizes in recognition of their efforts (41.50%). Many

leaders reported invoking creativity in faculty members (17.02%). A few considered motivation will enhance work performance of their colleagues (12.76%). There were hardly any responses as to developing a conducive working environment (4.25%).

One leader said:

> 'I learned through training that there are many ways to motivate your team other than providing financial rewards, e.g., appreciate them, say well done, give a pat on their back and provide them with a spacious office place in recognition of their efforts, etc..' (BZF1H1)

Leaders stress to a much larger extent this type of behaviour (N 94 as compared to 37). Leaders were now clear how to use non-financial rewards to encourage intellectual stimulation.

5. Discussion & conclusion

There is a lack of leadership intervention studies in the context of higher education. To fill this gap, we developed a leadership intervention based on transformational leadership by involving academic leaders of a Pakistan University.

Based on the literature we identified indicators of change in leaders' awareness related to the six transformational leadership behaviours. Post-intervention results confirm a significant change in the awareness level of leaders. This increase in awareness through a leadership training program is comparable to what was found in the study of De Vries et al. (2009) they organized a TL development program for executives. In addition, Hannum and Martineau (2008) stress that next to changes in awareness, they could also observe positive changes in organisational outcomes. Barrett and Barrett (2007) also identified in their research; leadership development programs were being implemented, and it was believed by some at the 'centre' that there was a strong correlation between successful departments and the capabilities of heads. Our positive results are further strengthened by what Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, and Chan (2009) identified in their research: there is a 66% chance of the positive adoption of new behaviour. Our study findings based on transformational leadership also confirm the study results of Abrell, Rowold, Weibler, and Moenninghoff (2011) they found improved results after the leadership development training program.

6. Limitations

The findings of our study show that already after six weeks, leaders reported a growing awareness in relation to six TL-behaviours. However, some limitations of the present study have to be acknowledged.

Firstly, we only involved a small sample from one university in a focused six-week intervention. This methodological constraint calls for a larger sample in a longer lasting intervention.

Secondly, we adopt a qualitative research methodology, building on interviews that could be enriched with data from observations. This could allow to go beyond studying awareness as perceived by the leaders and to focus on behavioural changes. In addition, a mixed method design could look for a confirmation of changes in related quantitative data, resulting from, e.g., surveys. Lastly, we did only

involve leaders in our research methodology. The intervention impact could also be studied by interviewing or studying teachers and by analysing their perspective on changes in related TL-behaviours.

The importance of leadership training could have been considered as a stronger policy priority. The importance of leadership training is often accepted, but not prioritized. The latter could be enhanced by discussing leadership development at the macro level with, e.g., the Higher Education Commission to define this as a quality indicator of state-of-the-art universities.

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