HRD--Leadership Training for Women on the Lower Rungs of the Organizational Ladder: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This case study examined the responses of a group of women to a series of classes on leadership development, modeled after the Academy for Community Leadership. This opportunity was offered to a group of workers who are not normally slated for this type of training. Through a series of eight two-hour classes the participants were introduced to various topics related to leadership such as leadership styles, teambuilding, workplace diversity, problem solving, communication and action plan development. The data collection methods included a weekly evaluation, journaling, non-participant observation and a post-session interview. The results revealed that the participants had increased their self confidence, and they felt better prepared to do their current job. They expressed aspirations to continue their education as well as to seek promotions. They came to understand the qualities of leadership that they already possessed as well as areas for improvement. The results of this qualitative study suggest that leadership training should be offered to groups such as CNAs, direct support professionals and others on the lower rungs of the organizational ladder who are not typically offered this type of training.

Introduction

Organizations that are committed to investing in their workforce provide opportunities for human resource development. The importance of human resource development cannot be underestimated. A focused effort to develop talent should result in a more productive and innovative workforce which consistently delivers quality customer service (Bolman and Deal, 2003).

DePree (1989) pointed out that an important responsibility of leaders is to help “identify, develop and nurture future leaders” (p. 14). Unfortunately, those already in leadership positions are often the ones who are selected for further leadership development. According to Kristick (2009), “leadership development is often reserved for senior executives” (p. 50).

Parks (2005) in her book, Leadership Can Be Taught, explained “that people cannot simply be told what they need to know in the complexity of practice. They must learn to see for themselves” (p. 5). She suggested the opportunity to practice leadership; to learn by doing. She outlined a method where a class itself becomes an opportunity to learn from the social group that develops. Even though traditional teaching methods are utilized such as lecture, readings, videos, group discussion, reflective writing and coaching, she goes beyond this to use the group itself as a sort of laboratory to discover the strengths of the students.

The opportunity for leadership training for women on the lower rungs of the organizational ladder is limited. They may not see themselves as having the potential to assume leadership responsibilities. Women in this group may not have the opportunity for non-formal leadership development training. In this study I described, using a case study method, the
experiences of a group of women employed on the lower rungs of the organizational ladder as they progressed through a leadership curriculum.

According to Merriam and Simpson (2000), “case study has been used to describe and/or evaluate the efficacy of a new program or new approach to ongoing problems” (p. 111). I observed the struggles that the group was faced with as well as how they coped with the issues as they emerged (Stake, 1995). There were opportunities to observe the leadership styles of the participants in this group as well as how those styles might have been enhanced during the eight-week course. According to Stake (1995) “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (p. 8). I set out to capture, describe and analyze the experiences of one particular group of women. This group was treated as one single case study.

Organizational succession planning typically focuses on the top positions with an emphasis on how the organization can replace leaders who might move on to other positions or retire. This study provided an avenue for those at the lower rungs of the corporate ladder to enhance their leadership skills. This type of training may help this particular group realize their promotional potential in this organization or choose a more active role in their community. This study intended to discover emergent themes for this group by describing the participant responses to this experience. The thick description could help others understand this experience from the participants’ perspective (Stake, 1995). The study increased understanding of the experiences of this particular group of women by examining their reflections on the eight-week course along with their perceptions of their increased leadership abilities.

**Description and Findings**

The topical areas delivered during the eight-week series included an overview of leadership styles, team building, cultural awareness, problem solving/consensus building as well as communication and leadership. One speaker was asked to encourage the participants to write their own action plan for further leadership development. Finally, during the last session, the president of the company joined the group to share some of his leadership experiences and insights.

According to Stake (1995), “case study research is not sampling research. We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one” (p. 4). The participants in this study were Residential Assistants (RAs) who work in a group home setting, providing supervision and support for adults with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities. The individuals held non-leadership positions, providing administrative assistance to the Residential Coordinator. The RAs did not supervise any staff. However, direct support professionals (RLIs) look to them for guidance and as role models at each work site.

The RAs range in age from early twenties to late fifties. All of the individuals in my study were women. Their educational backgrounds ranged from having a GED, being a high school graduate, to having had some college level classes.

The participants were given a homework assignment to complete the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator survey online. According to Rutzick (2007), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was designed in the 1940s by Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, a mother-daughter team. They based the assessment tool on Carl Jung’s psychological types. The MBTI categorizes 16 personality types in a combination of Extrovert-Introvert, Sensing-Intuiting, Thinking-Feeling and Judging-Perceiving.
Each study participant was asked to complete an online evaluation through the internal email system within 48 hours after the conclusion of each class. The questions were those presented in the Critical Incident Questionnaire as developed by Brookfield (1995).

After the conclusion of the eight-week course, a post-program interview was conducted, within two weeks, with each individual. This was a semi-structured interview designed to encourage the participants to describe what this experience was like for them. Seidman (2006) noted, “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9).

The post-program interview questions sought to identify strengths that participants discovered about themselves during the course as well as how this knowledge may help them both at work and in their community. According to Grafanaki (1996), “the use of qualitative methods of collecting data promotes reflexivity, self-awareness and empowerment of the parties involved in the research, by giving voice to people to tell their stories in their own words” (p. 6). To protect the confidentiality for the participants of the study, pseudonyms were assigned.

Mona wrote in her journal that she strives to “be a looker, looking at the ordinary to see the unusual.” She went on to write that she wants to use “an open mind to choose the best, not settling for just any answer.” Other qualities of a leader Louise noted included the desire “to teach/lead them [clients and staff] to do the right thing.” Kathy also mentioned the necessity of “the wearing of different hats on different days, depending on needs.” Mona expressed her ideal of a leader by writing in her journal summary “that the full measure of a person is not to be found in the person himself, but the colors and textures that come alive in others because of him.” She went on to elaborate that this includes “[taking] initiative when there is a need, to do something about it. To seize the moment, recognize what your team members need, and help them to do the best they can. Thinking ahead, anticipate what problems might arise and know what it will take to reach the objective. Spend time wisely, get ahead of deadlines or help someone else. Recognizing and doing what needs to be done before you are asked, to take action, launch a goal.”

In the area of communication Louise noted that, “we also learned that good communication isn’t just speaking; its body language, writing, signs, videos, illustrations as well.” Fay noted that it is important “to communicate what is expected and follow through with it.” Samantha reflected in her journal about “just how much your body language says to people.” Fay, during her interview, shared that she has learned about “communication and teamwork. I know that I’m trying to use that, especially with the transition that we are having.”

Another topic that seemed to have a huge impact on the participants was teamwork. Mona enjoyed “listening to the speaker explaining about teamwork, the different personalities it takes to make a good team.” Kaye discussed “talking about teamwork. Leadership is what we used to think as being one person stepping up and taking over, which it really is but if you have a whole team that is backing you up it helps. . .we can all do it together.”

Other general responses to the training centered on self-esteem and things that participants had learned about themselves. Samantha wrote in a weekly CIQ that she realized “how important we are when it comes to helping the RC run a smooth group home.” While Louise noted she “had not differentiated [her]self as a leader so much and [is] starting to do that now.” Kaye shared in her interview that she “can actually be a better leader.” She also shared, “It showed me where I need to improve and that I need to step out more.” She liked one quote from the second speaker “be yourself, don’t be the shadow.”
I hoped to discover that the RAs, through their exposure to leadership ideas and perhaps increased self-esteem, would indicate an interest in moving into leadership roles. When sorting the data, I identified a category I labeled aspirations. Mary noted in her homework assignment that she has a goal for “further education and to move up the ladder …possibly to become an RC or Area Residential Coordinator.” April listed a goal to “obtain a degree.” Kaye also listed a goal to get a “degree in psychology.” Mona listed “training and school.” Kathy did so as well by noting “more education.” She also wrote about getting her “own business.”

Several themes have emerged. Morse and Richards (2002) noted that, “researchers often seek more abstract ideas or general themes in data. By a theme we mean a common thread that runs through the data” (p. 113). Most of the participants expressed surprise and appreciation that the learning process was fun. They discussed learning from each other and finding out that they share common issues. They expressed the realization that we all have the potential to be leaders. The essence of this realization is that leadership is not dependent on a designated role but is a set of characteristics that can be enhanced through training. Another theme is that education and training often reinforce the desire for further education and increased self-esteem. An additional theme was the desire for further education and promotional advancement.

**Conclusion**

It was interesting to note the participants’ appreciation of the time spent together with their cohorts. Learning from each other, as well as learning from the various speakers, is one of basic foundation blocks of adult education. Human Resource Development addresses the more formalized aspects of training employees in the workplace. Through this structured series of classes, the participants had an opportunity to experience a culture of learning as described by Longo (2005). He noted that through community education, we can see “ordinary people as producers, not consumers; actors, not spectators, and teachers, not students” (p. 9). This time together allowed the group to create their own community of learners. Scarlett mentioned that they have had “great speakers and great participators.” This class gave participants an opportunity for personal reflection and to learn about their peers. This led to a greater appreciation of their role as an RA. They also began to appreciate the support they can offer to each other. The idea that we are all in this together was shared by Jane when she mentioned that, “you can learn from other people who are in the same position you are. You learn different ideas on how they handle things maybe you hadn’t thought about.”

This case study attempted to discover the responses to training provided to a group of employees who would not normally be selected for leadership training. Leadership development is typically reserved for those who are already in a designated leadership position within an organization or those who are being groomed for such. By analyzing the responses to this leadership development class, it appears that leadership training could be beneficial to all segments of the organization, not just those at the top. The enhancement of leadership characteristics should not be confined to a select few. By broadening the reach of this type of training, the notion of servant leadership could be introduced as “shared authority, empowerment and building a community of trust” (Daft, 2005, p. 230).

This research project, providing leadership training for women on the lower rungs of the organizational ladder, allowed me the opportunity to change my understanding of leadership. I began the project with the belief that the Resident Assistant participants in the study may not see themselves has having the potential to assume leadership responsibilities. After concluding this.
study, I see that I was defining leadership as attached to a particular role or position within an organization. This study has revealed to me that leadership skills and attributes are not restricted to a particular position; that anyone within the organization can develop leadership characteristics. In that sense, this research study has been transformational for me. I have studied leadership in the formal academic setting, through non-formal learning settings, such as conferences and seminars, and in an informal way through observations of leaders. I have previously attached “leadership” to a particular position within an organization or in the community. This study has led me to believe that leadership is a much broader and more inclusive cluster of attributes that can be enhanced for anyone in any setting.

References


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