

Changing from the inside out

Leadership development in East Africa

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Based on extensive field research and recent publications, Rick James concludes that leadership development is both feasible and crucial for capacity development. But the process is complex, messy, and requires the combined use of a variety of methods.

Capacity development is impossible without leadership change. Extensive capacity development efforts over the past decades have demonstrated repeatedly that for organisations to change, their leaders must also change. Indeed, the commitment of leaders to organisational change is synonymous with their openness to their own personal development. In today's turbulent times, leaders must be leaders of change, both within their organisations and in themselves. As Nelson Mandela said with insight: "You can never change society if you have not changed yourself".*

A diverse range of development stakeholders are currently prioritising leadership development. This interest has been matched by a plethora of publications on leadership – the Amazon website features more than 16,000 publications referring to leadership, up by almost 50% in the last two years – and increased investment in leadership development activities. Yet we know startlingly little about leadership development outside of a very narrow and culturally specific Western, corporate context. We need to ask ourselves: Is the traditional business-school approach to leadership development effective for leaders outside the corporate arena? Can we even develop leaders from outside? If we can, what sort of content should leadership development programmes include, and what processes should they follow?

What makes leaders change?



To address these questions we need to understand the realities and challenges that leaders face, and the events and interventions that have catalysed change in the past. Once we have a clearer idea of what makes leaders change, then we can design leadership development programmes accordingly. Between 2002 and 2005, INTRAC in Malawi, CDRN in Uganda, and CORAT in Kenya undertook a collaborative three-country study, with support from Cordaid, to explore such questions.

The research concluded that leadership development interventions can catalyse change, but only when they are "taken personally" by leaders. Authentic and significant change took place at the level of a person's core values – in their heart,

rather than simply their head. Such interventions are therefore more likely to be effective if they provide space for self-reflection and opportunities for feedback, and if they focus on personal values and vision, rather than simply teaching management skills.

Congested lives

The research revealed that civil society leaders' behaviour was significantly influenced by, and strongly constrained by, their congested lives. Many NGO leaders have to operate simultaneously in three different worlds: the global aid world; the urban, organisational context in which they live and work; and the rural village setting where their extended families still live. Each world places different demands and expectations on leaders. Donors often insist on over-hasty timeframes, short-term projects and quick results. NGO staff expect their leaders to ensure job security, provide direction, enable personal advancement, and inspire them to achieve. Leaders' extended families count on them to provide education, medical and financial support. Satisfying such diverse demands is almost impossible, and trying to do so makes leaders' lives extremely congested, leaving them little time to reflect on their own behaviour, and inhibiting their potential for change.

Gender and HIV/AIDS

For women leaders, these constraints are exacerbated by the pressure of gender roles. The research provided many examples of how inequality and heightened pressure adversely affect female leaders. Common experiences include prejudice, a lack of education and promotion opportunities, harassment, lower salaries and greater family pressure compared with their male counterparts.

In sub-Saharan Africa leaders face additional pressures due to the onslaught of HIV/AIDS on their organisations and families. One young female leader in Malawi reported that she has one child of her own, but has had to take in 14 orphaned nieces and nephews. Another had lost six out of 14 staff to AIDS in the last five years. HIV is causing leaders to spend up to 47% of their disposable income on funerals, family medical bills, and support for extra dependants. They also take an average of 15 days off per year for funerals. Such a situation would affect the work of any leader.

Using power

Congested lives give leaders little time to practise the oft-professed 'empowering' approach to leadership. They tend to slip into authoritarian roles without realising that the process is going on. Subtly they change, because it is easier and less time-consuming to be authoritarian. Autocratic leadership behaviour can be addictive, and increasingly dysfunctional.

Yet respondents said that the most significant changes they had made as leaders related to their use of power. The most frequently cited change was towards a more participatory leadership style, with greater staff involvement in decision making. While the research did not seek to validate the extent of this shift, these changes had had a measurable effect on organisations in terms of enabling them to expand their impact through increased funding. As with most leadership development, there is no irrefutable evidence that proves a direct link between programmes and impact. But this may be more a function of the limitations of measurement systems than of the programmes. After all, in the private sector there is a clear correlation between investment in leadership development and improved company performance.

There are downsides to leadership as well. Lack of responsible leadership can destroy decades of patient nurturing of human skills or developing institutions. In such situations, ownership claims can be confused, opening the door to a multitude of interests and demands. Some influential but regressive leaders have actually used all the techniques and knowledge available to degrade their institutions or societies. They have also twisted ownership to suit their own agendas, gearing it towards a culture of entitlement or excessive nationalism that is detrimental to capacity development. And while the challenges of development escalate, the leadership capacity dwindles, many lured by the prospect of better opportunities overseas.

Change processes

In our research we found that the processes leaders went through in order to change were complex and messy. This is not surprising given that leadership involves not just an individual, but relationships among diverse and complicated human beings. Leadership change tended to be more of a gradual evolutionary process than a sudden revolutionary leap forward. It was not a linear, planned process, but a cascade of events.

Yet amidst the complexity, some common elements emerged from leaders' accounts of their experiences. Various external factors and events provided feedback that catalysed them to behave in a different way, including personal pain and discontent from 'constructive' criticism; organisational crisis; changes in their role; new knowledge derived from training, reading and interventions; and positive examples and inspiration provided by others. Although important, these external catalysts did not in and of themselves bring about change. What mattered was how people gave meaning to those events. Inside themselves leaders decided they had to change based on their values, beliefs, sense of self, openness and aspirations. The change they made was at this deep internal level before it was externalised as changed behaviour. Authentic change was an 'inside-out' process.

The responses of others to leaders who demonstrated changed behaviour also served to reinforce or undermine the change process.

Implications

Leadership development inputs appeared to be one piece of a complex and dynamic jigsaw of change. They were particularly effective when they addressed leaders' own personal lives, focused on their values and beliefs, and were directly applied to their organisational context. Clearly, however, such inputs were by no means the only piece of the jigsaw.

Leaders only changed when they internalised and personalised the external catalysts. For people to change it is necessary to engage their values, vision, emotions, and even spiritual faith. This finding has been echoed by many mainstream management writers. Promoting personal change is therefore a crucial component of any leadership development programme. Consequently, it is important to create spaces for reflection, rather than simply cramming inputs; use questions to encourage people to challenge and discover answers themselves; and provide opportunities for personal feedback from facilitators and/or peers.

Catalysing change

The three-country study highlights some powerful contextual and cultural realities that influence leadership behaviour. These must be recognised and explored in leadership development work if such programmes are to engage with leaders' real lives and influence them to change. An effective leadership development process is directly applied in the organisational as well as the personal lives of leaders, and must examine social, cultural and family pressures, as well as



The research demonstrated that leaders changed their behaviour in response to a wide range of stimuli rather than one single input. Effective leadership development therefore will make use of a variety of methods – such as mentoring and coaching; peer group support; self-assessment; distance learning; exchanges, exposure visits and sabbaticals, as well as conventional training. This reinforces earlier assertions that the four approaches to leadership development (personal growth, conceptual understanding, feedback and skill building) are limited on their own, but effective when used together.

Mentoring and coaching are increasingly perceived to be effective in promoting behaviour change, and are being used by large international NGOs like Oxfam and the Red Cross, as well as by NGOs working with small and emerging community-based organisations. Leadership counselling enables values, aspirations, exit plans, extended family pressures, staff motivation, and power to be discussed and questioned. Peer support networks can also make important contributions to changes in leaders' behaviour. Leadership development initiatives should therefore enquire into methods of encouraging the formation of such formal or informal groups.

The research revealed that an 'empowering' style of leadership is not culturally confined to Europe or North America, but touches on core principles of human behaviour that are expressed in most, if not all, cultures. Exploring the meaning of empowering leadership and applying it to participants' contexts are therefore legitimate and important elements of any leadership development programme.

Principles of good practice

Leadership development is indispensable for capacity development. Experience has shown that leadership development programmes can be extended to those not normally reached by traditional programmes. Local leaders can be developed. While external leadership programmes can go a long way in developing key skills and behaviours, it would be a mistake to imagine that they can develop the 'complete leader'. The following principles of good practice can be defined:

1. Leadership cannot be reduced to a mechanistic checklist of competencies without compromising much of the essence of leadership. Personal traits such as drive, perseverance and emotional resilience cannot be trained.
2. Leadership development programmes will be more effective when they are rooted in the contexts in which leaders live and work, and address the realities that leaders face on a daily basis.
3. Leadership development needs to personalise change. Formal inputs should be reinforced by less formal approaches such as mentoring and coaching. Opportunities for feedback must be built into processes. Some behaviour change cannot be taught, but can only be developed through greater self-awareness and understanding of the impact of personal behaviour and leadership styles on others. Yet we know that it is not easy to report on such personal change.

As with any aspect of human development, it is impossible to attribute change to just one factor. Leadership development interventions in the research did make a difference, but not always in the ways expected. Indeed, none of the leadership change processes analysed would have lent itself to a predetermined 'log frame'. Human change is more complex than many reductionist (though useful) planning systems. Yet although the impacts are impossible to predict, this does not mean that interventions should not be well planned. If we follow the principles of good practice outlined above, we are more likely to achieve the leadership development results that we desire, and which are the critical core of broader capacity development.

Links

[Christian Organizations Research and Advisory Trust of Africa \(CORAT Africa\), Kenya.](#)

[Community Development Resource Network \(CDRN\), Uganda.](#)

[The Leadership Quarterly.](#)

[UNDP ? HIV/AIDS Leadership Capacity Development Programme.](#)

[World Bank ? Developing Leadership Capacity: From Design to Impact. Brown Bag Lunch discussion \(2006\).](#)

[World Bank ? Indigenous Peoples Leadership Capacity-Building Program for the Andean Countries.](#)

[INTRAC Praxis programme on leadership development](#)

The programme has established an e-learning group on leadership development. If you would like to join, please contact Rick James at rjames@intrac.org.

Further reading

R. Bolden (2004) What is Leadership?
[Centre for Leadership Studies](#), University of Exeter, UK.

CTA (2005) Farmers? organisations: The challenges of leadership.
[Spore, 119.](#)

V. Hauck (2004) Resilience and High Performance amidst Conflict, Epidemics and Extreme Poverty: The Lacor Hospital, Northern Uganda.
[ECDPM Discussion Paper 57A.](#)

C. Lopes and T. Theisohn (2003) Ownership, Leadership and Transformation: Can we do better for capacity development?
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[Wheatley, M. and Kellner-Rogers, M. \(1998\) Bringing Life to Organizational Change. Spokane, WA: Berkana Institute.](#)