The development of leaders is a stated goal of most organizations, yet a validated framework and theory for leader development does not yet fully exist, nor is there a method for determining who is developmentally ready to engage in leader development. The authors of this article provide a framework for examining how one can accelerate leader development. They propose that leader developers first focus on assessing and then building the developmental readiness of individual leaders, as well as the developmental readiness of the organization as prerequisite steps for accelerating positive leader development. They identify and discuss 5 specific constructs comprising their initial modeling of developmental readiness (i.e., learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy, self-concept clarity, self-complexity, and metacognitive ability), as well as suggest methods for assessing and developing these 5 components.

Keywords: leader development, developmental readiness, learning versus performance goal orientation, self-concept clarity, metacognitive ability

The development of leaders is often stated as a primary goal in many organizations, yet a validated general framework and theory for leader development does not exist, nor is there a method for determining who is developmentally ready to engage in such training (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, in press). We suggest that there has been relatively little discussion on how to best set the conditions to successfully accelerate development before placing leaders through leader development programs or experiences. We find this rather curious, as organizations in the United States spent approximately $12 billion on leader development in 2007 with little, if any, evidence to support the efficacy of these interventions (“Industry Report,” 2007). In this article, we discuss the importance of assessing and then enhancing the developmental readiness of participants before the onset of other leader development activities. We also examine how the construct of
developmental readiness can be used to help explain why some leader development interventions have a more or less positive impact depending on both the particular leader participating in the intervention and the organization’s context.

Parallels for the concept of being developmentally ready and open to change comes from the clinical literature related to the success of therapy. For example, Singer (1997) reported that higher rates of recovery from alcohol addiction were associated with a revision to the alcoholic’s own view of himself or herself and how that individual described their life to others. The concept of developmental readiness has also been applied to preparing adolescents for education (e.g., Plake, Impara, & Spies, 2003) and clinical therapy (Ronen, 2003). The clinical literature suggests that the readiness of the individual to undergo therapy is perhaps more important than either the therapist or therapeutic technique.

We set out here to explain how leader development can be accelerated to have a positive impact on the leader, leadership, and performance. As shown in Figure 1, we propose that leaders with higher levels of developmental readiness in the right context will be better able to reflect upon and make meaning out of events, challenges, and/or opportunities that can stimulate and accelerate positive leader development. Furthermore, as depicted by the dotted line in Figure 1, we propose that cycles of successful development can further increase the leader’s developmental readiness and performance over time. We also show in Figure 1 that, as the individual leader’s readiness increases, so too does the organization’s climate for development. Specifically, leaders influence the type of climate that their followers experience in organizations. Thus, to the extent that the leader is positive about and personally models development, it is more likely he or she will promote positive development in others (Avolio & Luthans, 2006).

![Figure 1. Leader and organizational developmental readiness.](image-url)
The Development of Leaders

Before we can launch into a detailed discussion of what constitutes the acceleration of a leader’s development, it is important to provide evidence for the following: (a) whether leaders can be developed and, if so, (b) the processes through which such development unfolds.

Born Versus Made

Noted behavioral geneticists, Plomin and Daniels (1987) summarized existing research on the influence of heritability on human development stating, “Behavioral-genetic research seldom finds evidence that more than half of the variance in complex behavioral traits is due to genetic differences among individuals . . . most behavioral variability among individuals is environmental in origin.” A critical question about the heritability of who emerges as a leader can be stated as follows: What constitutes the complex interaction between one’s genetic endowments and environment that produces the human attributes and capabilities that predict who will emerge and excel as a leader as opposed to those individuals who don’t?

Recent behavioral genetics research with twins provides compelling evidence that one’s ability for leadership is more developed or made than heritable or born. The reason for using twins to study heritability and leadership is that identical twins are 100% the same in terms of genetic endowments versus fraternal twins, who are about 50% the same. Consequently, if identical twins have exactly the same genetics, and if emerging as a leader was determined by one’s genetics, then identical twins should have identical rates of emergence as leaders. However, we know from recent research comparing identical and fraternal twins that much of the variance in terms of who ends up in leadership roles is better explained by environmental factors versus heritability (Arvey, Rotundo, Johnson, Zhang, & McGue, 2006; Arvey, Zhang, Avolio, & Kruger, 2007; Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa, in press).

This type of behavioral genetics research examines three key components that may contribute to a leader’s emergence including (a) heritability, (b) shared environment, and (c) unshared environment. The twin’s shared environment includes facets such as whether the twins grew up in the same home and attended the same schools. The unshared environment represents the unique experiences for each twin including one twin playing football and the other being on the debate team. In a standard behavioral genetics regression formula (see Arvey et al., 2007, for details on how these estimates are calculated), researchers control for the values assigned to the shared and unshared environments to determine how much remaining variance is attributable to heritability. The dependent variable that is predicted is the number of leadership roles assumed by the individual in his or her career. In three separate studies, results showed that, for both men and women, approximately 30% of leader emergence was accounted for by heritability.

On the basis of the aforementioned findings, we can conclude that leaders and leadership are largely made through experiences. We also suggest that how quickly leaders develop capability to lead effectively is in part linked to the readiness of the individual to engage in those developmental experiences described in more detail later.

The Leader’s Life Story

We suggest that the factors that contribute to making a leader are in part a subset of all of the formative experiences an individual has accumulated throughout the individual’s
life course that may position the individual to more effectively assume leadership roles. Avolio (2005) described the leader development process as a lifelong journey in which the individual interprets and makes meaning out of experiences that contribute to enhancing the individual’s understanding of self and leader development. One’s self-construct is associated with one’s self-identity (Hogg, 2001), self-standards (Carver & Scheier, 1982), and self-knowledge (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Indeed, Kihlstrom and Klein (1994, p. 194) suggested that the self-construct is “the point at which cognitive, personality, and social psychology meet.” The self-construct is an elaborate and highly accessible memory structure containing one’s domain of self-knowledge, and for our purposes here the domain represents leader self-knowledge (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This self-knowledge is used by the leader to construct his or her narrative, or what we refer to here as the leader’s life story. By constructing one’s narrative, we mean that people proactively make meaning of their experiences, thereby forming their identity or self-construct. One’s self-construct then becomes the lens through which one views future experiences (Hermans, 2002).

Applied to authentic leader development (Avolio, 2005; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio & Luthans, 2006), Sparrowe (2005) and Shamir and Eilam (2005) have proposed and have conducted some preliminary testing of narrative approaches to examining how authentic forms of leader development occur. Their main position is that every leader becomes a self-author of their life narrative. Thus, how individuals experience and interpret events and how they include these events in narratives depends on their existing self-construct and the individuals’ readiness to be open to and extract relevant meaning from events for growth.

McAdams (1993) argued that people work on different aspects of their life narrative or story depending on where they are in their life span. McAdams also suggested that these personal life stories change over time, whereby early in one’s career the individual may have a “rough draft” that evolves over time as they accumulate additional experiences, challenges, and opportunities.

The content held in the leader’s self-construct, or life narrative, contains self-views such as “I am a visionary leader” or “I am adept at learning new skills,” whereas its structure represents how content is actually organized with other self-views across the various social roles that comprise the leader’s self-construct/narrative (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, in press). For example, a leader may see himself or herself as adept at learning new skills associated with his or her role as a team leader but not those associated with being a company spokesperson.

Take, for example, the born versus made issue discussed earlier. To the degree that an individual defines himself as a born leader; the experiences he accumulates over the life course may be interpreted and codified differently (e.g., more openly, positively, and richly) in the self-construct as opposed to those interpreted by someone who believes leaders are made. This is because each leaders’ self-construct guides how subsequent experiences are interpreted and narrated in terms of describing who the leader is, who he/she is not, and who that person can become. This suggests that it is essential for us to determine how the self-construct is composed and changed to positively accelerate leader development.

**Trigger Events**

Luthans and Avolio (2003) have suggested as part of their model of authentic leader development that there are trigger events that occur in one’s life that may contribute to
changing the individual’s leadership potential. Whether these trigger events contribute to development depends in part on the individual’s level of developmental readiness. For example, for one individual who is more developmentally ready, a challenging project at work could stimulate a period of deep reflection on how best to start, lead, and conclude the project. However, for someone who is not ready to think about how this event affects his or her leader self-construct, the trigger event may simply be one among many that day, which had no impact on development.

Pillemer (2001) and McAdams (2001) have described six types of life events that can potentially affect an individual’s life narrative in positive or negative ways. For example, originating events are seen as establishing the basis for one’s beliefs or life focus, whereas turning points usually occur later in life, leading an individual to challenge his or her fundamental beliefs to determine whether they are still appropriate. Ligon, Hunter, and Mumford (2008) examined the life histories of 120 outstanding historical leaders and reported that more positive and constructive leaders had experienced originating events that had firmly established positive personal beliefs and values early in their life span. Conversely, more destructive or selfish leaders experienced more debilitating events early in life, resulting in negative life narratives.

Avolio and Luthans (2006) argued that high-impact leader development experiences create a point of disequilibrium and heightened self-awareness that can lead the individual to challenge his or her basic beliefs and assumptions. We contend that this sort of disequilibrium can occur from both positive and negative trigger events and that each can facilitate growth, provided that the leader is otherwise developmentally ready. This is because disequilibrium prompts or compels an individual to revise his or her self-construct in light of the new experience.

Trigger events are critical, as one’s scripts and internal cognitive linkages once formed are often very resistant to change (Young & Wasserman, 2005). For example, a parent may tell a child it is always good to assume the positive intent of others, as that helps the individual to initially motivate and engage others toward what you may want to accomplish. We would then expect this individual to be more likely to infer positive intent up front in his or her interactions with others. These sorts of “wired” connections would become rooted over time and altered only if the individual is open to and exposed to new or conflicting information that serve as “tipping points” (Ibarra, 2003).

In summary, a range of trigger events can occur at any point in one’s life stream and have been depicted earlier in this article as creating a state of disequilibrium that can potentially result in a change in the linkages held in an individual’s self-construct. If the individual is developmentally ready, this state of disequilibrium leads to a revisiting of his or her definition of the self-construct and a change in his or her narrative. If properly interpreted and processed, such trigger events are expected to stimulate further leader development, as well as produce perhaps a new way of approaching a particular leadership issue, opportunity, challenge, or problem.

**Individual Developmental Readiness**

If leaders and followers are active participants in writing their own narrative and developing their self-construct, then they will also determine how positively and how well they can write their own story. This agentic view is the epitome of constructivism and suggests that leaders can create either positive or negative self-fulfilling prophecies for their own development (Eden, 1992). We have referred to such positive ability, orienta-
tion, and openness to develop as developmental readiness. Applied to general individual and organizational learning, Hannah and Lester (in press) defined developmental readiness as “both the ability and motivation to attend to, make meaning of, and appropriate new knowledge into one’s long-term memory structures.” In our previous series of longitudinal pilot experiments involving emerging leaders, we have determined that learning goal orientation, efficacy, self-concept clarity, and metacognitive ability all contribute to and interact to enhance leaders’ level of developmental readiness.

Learning goal orientation represents whether individuals engage in tasks with a focus on achieving a certain performance standard or, conversely, to learn and develop (Button, Matieu, & Zajac, 1996). Someone who is more oriented toward learning will see challenges as a way to improve and develop and will be more accepting of failure in the pursuit of development.

Self-concept clarity represents the level of confidence and surety that leaders maintain over who they are, their self-construct (Campbell et al., 1996). We believe that leaders with greater clarity over their self-construct will have a firm starting point that will enable them to further adjust their self-construct in response to new experiences.

Metacognitive ability has been defined as the capacity for higher order processing, or simply, an individual’s ability to think about the way he or she thinks (Flavell, 1987; Metcalf & Shimamura, 1994). In terms of leadership, one’s metacognitive ability could be represented by the leader’s ability to examine his or her own theory of leadership and to consider and make amendments to the theory on the basis of new experiences accumulated over time.

On the basis of additional longitudinal research that we have conducted, we now add a fifth construct to what constitutes developmental readiness and propose that the level of complexity in a leader’s self-construct (i.e., self-complexity) will also enhance leader development (Hannah et al., in press). More self-complex leaders have more dimensions representing their self with which to discriminate among and more robustly interpret leadership experiences. We now examine each of the components of developmental readiness in more detail.

**Goal Orientation**

Goal orientation is considered to be a fairly stable individual difference construct and consists of two dimensions including learning goal and performance goal orientation (Button et al., 1996). It has been suggested that these respective goal orientations are part of one’s implicit theory of self (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The implicit theory of one’s goal orientation is captured in the narrative one creates as to his or her ability to develop and change. Learning goal-oriented leaders tend to view themselves as incremental learners and interpret performance feedback as being developmental and useful for enhancing one’s potential. Conversely, performance goal-oriented leaders are prone to look at themselves as more of a fixed entity. For example, leaders who score high on performance goal orientation tend to view feedback as self versus task diagnostic. These leaders resist engaging in learning experiences and, following our logic described earlier, are less developmentally ready to engage in challenging leader development events in which failure may occur.

Leader developers should be alert to determining the goal orientation of those they are developing, as the type of goal orientation will undoubtedly contribute to how successful the leader development intervention is with individuals who are more or less performance versus learning goal oriented. For example, once the developer identifies that a leader is
more performance goal oriented, he or she could work to use greater levels of individually considerate and supportive behaviors to promote higher levels of psychological safety. Kahn (1990, p. 708) defined psychological safety as “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career.” With such higher levels of psychological safety in which the perceived costs for failure are reduced, we expect less resistance on the individual’s part to engage in development.

The goal-setting literature also suggests that developers may be more effective in mitigating the impact of having a performance orientation by using incremental goal setting and steadily increasing the level of challenge faced by learners taking on developmental experiences while focusing on successes versus failures and celebrating each achieved milestone (Locke & Latham, 1990). Conversely, for leaders with more of a learning goal orientation, research shows they devote greater attention and effort toward seeking and reflecting on realistic performance feedback from both successes and failures (e.g., Hannah, 2006; VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001).

**Developmental Efficacy**

More statelike and open to change than goal orientation, developmental efficacy is task and context specific (Bandura, 1997). Leaders’ developmental efficacy represents their level of confidence that they can develop a specific ability or skill for employment in a specific context or leader role. Such confidence would then result in greater effort on the individual’s part in pursuing experiences to develop those skills as well as enhancing the level of effort applied to those experiences (Lord & Hall, 2005).

Efficacy beliefs are critical to leader development because, when activated, they elicit encoding categories, affect, goals, expectancies, and self-regulatory plans that drive engagement and performance in tasks (Hannah & Luthans, 2008). Such orientation to master tasks has, in turn, been shown to drive the allocation of greater effort to reflect upon one’s learning and to seek more performance feedback (VandeWalle et al., 2001). Consequently, we propose that having a higher level of efficacy for development will enhance a leader’s ability to envision successful outcomes when engaging in developmental experiences and, in turn, promote further engagement (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, in press).

Relevant to what we have referred to as the positive acceleration of leader development, Kanfer and Ackerman (1989) demonstrated that learning efficacy predicts a person’s ability to acquire complex skills. Therefore, we suggest that building learning and/or developmental efficacy directly affects not only leaders’ development of knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also the efficacy beliefs associated with using those knowledges, skills, and abilities in leading.

We suggest that developmental efficacy can be built through the four standard experiential modes suggested by Bandura (1997), which include enacted mastery experiences, vicarious learning/role modeling, social persuasion and feedback, and physiological and psychological arousal. First, mastery experiences are developmental experiences that challenge the adequacy of a person’s current thinking and mental models (Avolio, 2005). Second, role modeling or vicarious learning can build developmental efficacy through viewing the successful leader development of similar others, thereby convincing an individual that he or she too can develop in the same way as in the model. Third, efficacy can be developed by means of social persuasion and feedback. For example, leaders can convey high expectations to a junior leader that he or she can develop and thereby initiate a “Pygmalion effect” that raises the follower’s efficacy for development.
Finally, developmental efficacy can be increased through raising levels of psychological arousal (Bandura, 1997) by tapping into leaders’ individual interests, positive feelings, and intrinsic motivation about a particular area of development.

**Self-Awareness and Clarity**

Self-clarity and/or awareness represent central themes in many models of effective leadership (e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003). This may be the case because the ongoing challenges of dynamic and multifaceted modern organizations prompt leaders to search for a greater understanding of the situation with which they are confronted and who they are in terms of their capabilities and motivation to handle the situation. We believe that a heightened sense of self-concept clarity, defined as “the extent to which self-beliefs (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141), will promote greater developmental readiness and leader development. Higher levels of self-awareness can enhance the leader’s ability to make meaning of relevant trigger events and how they contribute to the individual becoming a more effective leader.

Whereas self-concept clarity promotes higher levels of self-awareness, we next need to ask whether leaders are adaptive or more maladaptive in how they reflect on what they have learned about themselves. Avolio, Wernsing, Chan, and Griffeth (2007) have distinguished two forms of self-reflection that are relevant to understanding the positive acceleration of leader development, called *adaptive* and *maladaptive* reflection. Adaptive self-reflection represents a constructive process of reflection associated with patterns of thinking and emotions characterized by openness, positivity, and a learning goal-oriented perspective (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Such openness to aspects of the self can result in greater self-awareness and self-knowledge that then contributes to more effective choices in terms of actions, behaviors, and emotional self-regulation over time (Carver & Scheier, 1982).

Maladaptive self reflection involves more destructive ways of thinking that generates negative emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, and fear-based actions (Mor & Winquist, 2002), which could prevent or diminish one’s engagement in leader development experiences. When entering into maladaptive reflection, the individual ruminates over what did not work as opposed to what is possible and changeable. For example, after getting feedback on a leadership survey on which the leader overrated her own visionary leadership, someone who is maladaptive may become self versus task focused and ruminate on how her followers “simply don’t get her leadership.”

We also know that whether leaders choose to engage in adaptive versus maladaptive reflection is affected by how they are primed by situational factors that leader developers can control. For example, previous research has shown that it is relatively easy to elicit maladaptive reflection through instructions that ask participants to focus on the things that went wrong with a situation (e.g., Watkins & Teasdale, 2004). Rumination involves a repetitive re-examining of an issue coupled with higher levels of resistance and negative judgment (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). This type of rumination becomes increasingly more maladaptive to the extent that it sops up cognitive resources that could have otherwise been applied to problem solving, adaptation, and positive leader development.

In summary, to the degree that we can trigger adaptive self-reflection in leaders, we suspect that we can positively accelerate the development of leader self-awareness. Promoting such adaptive reflection will likely require that we design methods to follow leaders into situations in which they are addressing real challenges that may trigger
rumination. In situations characterized by high levels of emotional engagement and stress, we expect leaders to be more likely to go to rumination, thus inhibiting enhanced self-awareness. In these instances, the benefits of promoting adaptive reflection may be significant for promoting the development of leader self-awareness (Avolio, 2005).

**Leader Complexity**

Using a life story perspective, we suggest that the level of complexity in a leader’s self-construct (i.e., self-complexity) is directly associated with the level of complexity he or she has experienced and encoded into the self-construct from various trigger events (Hannah et al., in press). We also hold that complexity is generative and will positively influence leaders’ readiness to develop further complexity in the future. This is because more complex leaders have more internal associations with which to process and interpret unique and novel experiences. Cognitively complex leaders process information more thoroughly and expertly and perform tasks better because they use more dimensions to discriminate among stimuli and yet see more commonalities among these dimensions (Hannah, Eggers, & Jennings, 2008).

Applying our discussion of leader self-complexity to accelerating positive development, we suggest that more complex leaders are better able to perceive and attend to a greater range of factors that are represented in a developmental trigger experience. Furthermore, they will be better able to develop a refined conceptualization of their view of themselves as a leader, relative to the triggered experience and what is being learned.

Leaders’ self constructs and associated complexity are also associated with their various social roles, such as being a team leader, coach, or project leader (Hannah & Luthans, 2008; Hannah et al., in press). Specifically, the self is an elaborate and multidimensional structure that is differentiated on the basis of how a leader catalogs various attributes (e.g., confident or articulate), taking into consideration certain roles (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Therefore, the experiences that a leader has had, unique to each role, and their type of reflection will result in different levels of positive versus negative content, representing each role being stored and recalled.

Content (types and level of attributes) and structure (inclusion of attributes across roles) of the self-construct are important to leader self-development in that, when facing a developmental challenge, aspects of the self are triggered or primed and, in turn, the leader automatically activates other linked self-aspects that are pertinent to the triggered event and its interpretation (Hannah & Luthans, 2008). We suggest that this activated portion of the self can be viewed as a somewhat developmentally ready working self-concept that encourages a leader to engage in some developmental experiences and not others.

In summary, we suggest that a more complex leader will have greater personal resources to draw from when experiencing trigger events or moments. Hence, instead of activating an avoidance orientation when faced with a difficult developmental challenge, such individuals will broaden their thought repertoires and be able to visualize a greater breadth of potential successful developmental outcomes that can enhance developmental readiness.

**Metacognitive Ability**

Leading is widely recognized as requiring complex cognitive and social problem-solving skills and capacities (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). We believe that these complex skills and capacities are critical to accelerating leader development.
by assisting leaders in making better sense out of their developmental experiences. Metacognitive ability is how one is thinking about their thinking (Metcalf & Shimamura, 1994). This form of "second order" thinking entails awareness of one’s cognitive processes, cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and cognitive self-regulation. Also, in the context of this article, such meta-abilities relate to the individual’s capacity for examining his or her own self-construct.

When being confronted with a developmental trigger experience, first order thinking is exemplified by processing a given leadership challenge and perhaps resolving it without any impact on one’s self-construct and development, whereas metacognitive ability entails introspection over the actual thinking process as one is experiencing these events, as well as how those events may be interpreted and utilized in altering one’s self-construct or narrative. For example, a leader may assess how a given developmental challenge influences her emotions and how those emotions are influencing decisions. A leader may also metacognitively reflect upon the adequacy of the information being used in her thinking and what further information is needed to improve her judgments. Relevant to developmental readiness, Hannah (2006) reported that metacognitive processing was strongly related to higher levels of self-efficacy, goal orientation, and mastery orientation. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of learning goal or mastery orientation also appeared to allocate greater levels of effort to scrutinize development and to seek performance feedback (VandeWalle et al., 2001).

In summary, whereas high levels of complexity provides a rich set of knowledge that leaders can use to make meaning of a broad suite of developmental trigger experiences, metacognitive ability provides the processing capability to maximize the use of that enhanced rich suite of knowledge. Therefore, both metacognitive ability and self-complexity are necessary for accelerating positive leader development.

We propose that developers can build leaders’ metacognitive abilities by exposing them to various trigger events and then by focusing the leaders to use guided adaptive reflection through various metacognitive processing strategies; for example, prompting questions such as the following: “What positive or negative emotions are you experiencing right now after the event transpired?” “How are those emotions influencing your thoughts and behaviors?” “How does the new knowledge and skills you are learning fit within your description of what you describe as your self-identity?” “How does this experience help you grow toward what you consider your possible future self in terms of roles and expectations?”

Assessing Developmental Readiness

Organizations may assess the level of developmental readiness of their leaders through standardized survey instruments at key points in their development. Measures related to each developmental readiness construct are provided in the Appendix for this purpose.

We also believe that developmental readiness can be evaluated on the basis of using mentors or senior leaders who are trained to observe more junior leaders for signature developmental readiness behaviors and habits, such as those discussed earlier. For example, a mentor may observe a leader who shows more of a learning goal orientation and higher confidence when facing developmental challenges. Moreover, when a leader faces setbacks, the mentor could observe whether he or she seeks (vs. avoids) constructive feedback, as well as practices adaptive (vs. maladaptive) reflection.

We also believe that carefully crafted simulations could be used that place leaders in a series of trigger challenges of various degrees of difficulty in which trained observers
can code the leader’s signature developmental readiness behaviors, or in which the leader’s decisions can be captured by the simulator. In addition, leaders going through such simulations could be asked to provide verbal protocols of how they thought about and approached these challenges, providing further evidence of their developmental readiness.

Organizational Developmental Readiness

We now turn our attention from getting individuals’ developmentally ready, to setting the context for positive leader development to occur and flourish in organizations. There are many facets on which leader developers can focus to get the organization developmentally ready. For example, one organization with which we worked emphasized the importance of everyone taking ownership to influence the organization’s success. The idea was not to come to work and be a “renter” but rather to take ownership for delivering the best possible service.

Strengths-Based Organizations

Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed that each human being possesses a certain makeup of strengths (e.g., curiosity, courage, wisdom), which they view as somewhat, but certainly not entirely, stable personality traits that provide the psychological mechanisms that enable one to flourish and perform. Strengths-based approaches to leader and follower development (Avolio & Luthans, 2006) build upon this framework and argue that organizations should focus on developing strengths instead of mainly concentrating on mitigating weaknesses. Avolio and Luthans (2006) took this argument further by suggesting that one can create a climate for positive development that reinforces the developmental readiness of individuals to assume greater personal responsibility for their own development.

Strengths-based organizations facilitate leaders’ manifesting their true selves (i.e., being authentic) as they lead, and they promote the positive psychological capacities of their leaders and followers, which helps to stimulate positive (e.g., optimistic) thinking and greater inquiry into “who we are” and “what we can become.” Such a positive developmental context is established by leader developers who practice individualized consideration and create a climate that helps others to identify their strengths and potential. Such developers hold the desire and dedication to expend the time and resources—perhaps even at the sacrifice of short-term performance—to tailor the assignment of tasks and challenges that serve to accelerate the development of each individual leader by leveraging his or her unique strengths.

We argue that the majority of what promotes positive leader development is attributable to the type of context in which the individual leader is embedded, including what we consider the contextual characteristics and influences of the leader’s followers. A more positively focused climate that is psychologically safe (Kahn, 1990) will, with all other things being equal, contribute to accelerating positive leader development. Indeed, by enhancing the organization’s climate to support development, leaders will be better prepared to address difficult and challenging trigger events, particularly those that may not be so positive. This is because their personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy) for handling such events have been enhanced by how they had been treated by others over time as they experienced both successes and failures.
Cascading and Diffusing Effects of Leader Development

Bass, Waldman, Avolio, and Bebb (1987) have described how leadership at higher or more macro-organizational levels can affect subsequent levels using what they called the “falling dominoes” or “cascading of leadership” impact in organizations. This process suggests that leaders at more senior levels of organizations, perhaps even strategic levels, can develop an aggregate leadership style that cascades down, resulting in it being represented in similar form at subsequent organizational levels. This process of cascading can occur through social learning mechanisms such as role modeling and/or vicarious learning. We believe that, through a pattern of positive interactions between developmentally ready leaders and organizational members, an emergent positive collective culture and climate would form over time (as shown in Figure 1), further promoting the developmental readiness of all members. Through a similar process, however, the cascading of negative leadership could create an infectious, toxic environment that could diminish the developmental readiness of leaders and result in more maladaptive forms of reflection.

Research has shown that leaders can affect the self-construct of followers through role modeling (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004). This is because followers tend to develop a schema of prototypical leader qualities based on attractive and admired leaders (Ibarra, 2003). These prototypes then serve as a form of idealized behavior that members of the organization would come to identify with over time and be influenced by in terms of their own self-construct (Hogg, 2001).

It is important to note that this cascading influence process is bidirectional and can thus also occur from the bottom up. Howell and Shamir (2005) argued that the impact of followers in the leader–follower dynamic is critical. Kark and Shamir (2002) explored this dynamic, indicating that followers with a more stable self-identity and, we add, a higher developmental readiness may at critical times reinforce the leader in continuing forward with development, which in turn may further bolster the follower’s readiness, resulting in a cyclic reinforcing pattern.

We suggest that it is through this emergent process resulting from social interaction between leaders, followers, and peers that individual perceptions of developmental readiness can, over time, form group perceptions of developmental readiness. We believe that developmental readiness can thus be conceptualized at the individual level and/or through the diffusion of shared mental models (Klimoski & Mohammad, 1994) at collective levels.

Practical Implications

There are several key points that we suggest consultants and/or leader developers consider as they structure the next experience they will use to develop leaders and leadership.

- Organizations will increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of their leader development resource allocations by first ensuring that the organization and its leaders to be developed are developmentally ready.
- Preintervention assessments of developmental readiness of the organizational context and the individual leader(s) may determine whether the organization and leaders are ready to be developed and, if so, configure a tailored choice and sequence of events to be used to maximize the developmental intervention.
- Once developmental readiness has been assessed, leader developers can identify unique trigger events and experiences that will promote learning and development
for every individual leader. Some of these events may focus on enhancing the developmental readiness of the organization (e.g., psychological safety) and its leadership to promote further leader development. Other events may be common to the group of learners, whereas some ought to be unique to the individual learner on the basis of each learner’s level on the five developmental readiness factors.

- Development can be accelerated by increasing current leaders’ recognition that they constitute one of the most powerful forms of interventions through role modeling the five developmental readiness factors to future leaders; as well as by training and equipping leader developers with the skills and techniques needed to practice strengths-based leadership and to create a learning-oriented context.

- In terms of readying the context, organizational leaders can implement evaluation and reward mechanisms that will facilitate positive leader development. This includes aligning evaluation and reward mechanisms so that they (a) reinforce learning versus performance; (b) reward demonstrated individual development in each of the five developmental readiness factors; and, ultimately, (c) reinforce the self-construct and behavioral changes desired in leaders. This is particularly critical in sustaining transference of development from training site to the workplace and achieving sustained success.

- Leader developers will be well served by promoting that each developing leader understands that an able leader is largely made versus born and that he or she is the author of his or her own leadership journey.

- Finally, consultants can design ways to continually show the progress that is being gained in terms of leader development. For example, progress may be shown in terms of less tangible criteria (e.g., measuring the self-complexity of the leader over time as they rotate through developmental assignments), or increases in metacognitive ability to reflect on the adequacy of one’s leading can be measured after successive guided reflection sessions. Measuring the impact of the leader development intervention at individual and organizational levels not only will serve to mark its success, but also will reinforce further investments in such successes.

Conclusion

Most organizational leaders would not invest in the development of a new manufacturing system and process without first determining whether they believed they would be successful in implementing those systems and processes. Why then do organizational leaders not approach leader development with similar due diligence, given the long-term strategic effects of leaders and leadership on organizational success? Here, we have attempted to bring greater attention to preparing leaders and the context for continued successful development. Drawing from emerging theory, we have also offered a new framework for examining how organizations may approach such preparation. We believe that, by focusing on enhancing developmental readiness, organizations can maximize their return on investment from subsequent leader development efforts. Indeed, we would like to imagine a world for authentic leadership development, where interventions are customized on the basis of the developmental readiness of each leader and his or her organization. We argue that such a high degree of alignment would be an important factor in accelerating positive leadership development for positive impact and return in organizations.
References


Hermans, H. J. M. (2002). The person as motivated storyteller: Valuation theory and the


Appendix

Sample Developmental Readiness Measures

Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Awareness

The 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire includes a four-item leader self-awareness scale (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). The 12-item Self-Concept Clarity Measure assesses a single core clarity factor (Campbell et al., 1996).

Goal Orientation and Implicit Theory of Self

The Goal Orientation Inventory contains 20 items, 10 each to assess dimensions of learning and performance goal orientation (Button et al., 1996). The Implicit Theory of Self 8-item measure contains 4 items each for entity (fixed) and incremental (malleable) dimensions of implicit theory of self (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998).
Metacognitive Ability

The 52-item Meta-Cognitive Awareness Inventory assesses the two dimensions of knowledge of cognition (17 items) and regulation of cognition (35 items). After discussions with the measure’s lead author, we adapted the original measure into a reduced 24-item measure (Schraw & Dennison, 1994).

Self-Complexity

Self-complexity can be measured through an unrestricted trait sort (Q-sort) method as pioneered by Linville (1987), where participants are instructed to create self-aspect categories (i.e., social roles such as “team leader”) and then use blank cards to list attributes they perceive themselves to possess within each category. Conversely, researchers can preselect self-aspects and a list of possible attributes and create a paper-and-pencil measure as advanced by Woolfolk et al., on which participants rate whether and to what extent those attributes apply to each self-aspect (Linville, 1987; Rafaeli-Mor, Gotlib, & Revelle, 1999; Woolfolk, Gara, Allen, & Beaver, 2004).

Developmental Efficacy

We have not found a validated developmental efficacy measure directly developed to assess leadership development. Hannah’s (2006) 43-item Agentic Leadership Efficacy measure contains a 17-item scale measuring a leader’s efficacy for aspects of thought and self-motivation that includes a focus on developmental items.

Correction to Romney (2008)

In the article, “Consulting for Diversity and Social Justice: Challenges and Rewards” by Patricia Romney (Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 2008, Vol. 60, No. 2, pp. 139-156), the author refers to “Paul Winn.” The referenced author’s last name was printed incorrectly. The correct spelling is Winum.