Leader Derailment in Academe: Does the Training Match the Problems?

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ABSTRACT

Leader derailment of middle managers in higher education is most often attributable to self-defeating behaviors (SDBs) and problems with interpersonal relationships (PIRs). This study attempted to determine whether training provided for middle managers in Academe sufficiently addresses these issues. Our findings suggest that while little more than half the responding institutions provided some sort of training to first-time administrators; it was focused mostly on administrative issues. Less than half of the surveyed institutions offered any kind of training relating to PIRs or SDBs. We end the paper with recommendations and suggestions for improvements in training programs aimed at decreasing the incidence of leader derailment in Academe.

INTRODUCTION

Leader derailment occurs when a leader who is perceived to have high potential for future career advancement fails to achieve his or her potential, instead either plateauing at a lower level than expected in their organization, being demoted, or voluntarily or involuntarily leaving the organization (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). The rate of derailment is estimated to be as high as 50 – 75% (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Van Velsor, Taylor, & Leslie, 1993), making this an issue of concern for organizations, whose best interests are served when managers reach their full potential.

The small, but growing (Burke, 2006), body of scholarly literature indicates that derailment is primarily attributable to leadership, or people-related issues, rather than management, or task-related, issues (McCartney & Campbell, 2006). Specifically, leaders who engage in self-defeating behaviors (SDBs) and who have problems with

interpersonal relationships (PIRs) are more likely to derail. These findings suggest that the manner in which a leader interacts with others is a major factor in leader derailment (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995).

The preponderance of past research on leader derailment focuses on business settings, but recent efforts to expand the study of leader derailment into other areas, such as higher education administration, have shown that the pattern of leader derailment is similar across settings. Leader derailment in higher education administration is associated with problems with interpersonal relationships and self-defeating behaviors, just as it is in business settings (Campbell, McCartney, & Gooding, 2010). A clear implication to be drawn from these findings is that every effort should be made to assist high-potential individuals who are in higher education administration with enhancing their interpersonal skills and mitigating self-defeating behaviors, particularly through training and development efforts.

Unfortunately, higher education administrators, particularly at the middle levels of administration, may not be provided with extensive leadership training (Gmelch, 2002). When training is provided, the topics covered may pertain more to task-related issues, such as completing paperwork, and less to people-related issues. Our purpose in this study was to address the issue of leadership training in higher education in order to understand the extent to which higher education administrators are provided with leadership training programs and, if so, whether the programs include a strong focus on interpersonal skills, addressing the issues of SDBs and PIRs.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

In an early study of leader derailment, Lombardo and McCauley (1988) conducted interviews with executives for the purpose of profiling successful and unsuccessful high-potential individuals with whom the executives' had direct experience. As research on leader derailment in business settings continued, themes began to emerge across studies. Four themes were identified that appear to capture the major issues associated with leader derailment; (1) Problems with Interpersonal Relationships, (2) Failure to Meet Business Ob-

jectives, (3) Failure to Build and Lead a Team, and (4) Inability to Change and Adapt During a Transition (Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995). In subsequent studies of business-leader derailment using these themes, the first theme, Problems with Interpersonal Relationships (PIRs), consistently demonstrated the strongest association with leader derailment (e.g., McNally & Perry, 2002; Rasch, Shen, Davies, & Bono, 2008). The same theme appears to be a factor in academic-leader derailment as well (Campbell et al., 2010).

One issue that may contribute to problems with interpersonal relationships is self-defeating behaviors (SDBs), behaviors that are actually counterproductive to the intended outcome (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Renn, Allen, Fedor, & Davis, 2005). Parks and colleagues (1975) speculate that, although they are unsuccessful, self-defeating behaviors persist because they are coping mechanisms learned in past situations that are not adapted to the present (Parks, Becker, Chamberlain, & Crandell, 1975). For example, one study demonstrated that workers who wanted to increase their level of belonging in their organization attempted to do so by engaging in social interactions in such a way that they were less likely to be accepted by the group (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007).

A recent study of SDBs and leader derailment in higher education settings found that SDBs involving interactions with others (alienating, overly critical, inability to trust others, suspicious, rigid, defensive, hostile, over-controlling) were indicative of leader derailment (Irani Williams, Campbell, McCartney, & Gooding, Forthcoming). Avoiding hiring leaders who exhibit SDBs might be considered a first step in reducing the incidence of leader derailment, however, Irani Williams and colleagues (2011) note that SDBs are very difficult to detect during hiring procedures. This implies that organizations must attempt to reduce leader derailment that is attributable to SDBs through direct means, such as training.

Indeed, training has been identified as a valuable tool in preventing leader derailment (McCartney & Campbell, 2006; Van Velsor & Leslie, 1995) and in weakening dysfunctional behaviors (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Due to several social trends, the need for leadership training in

higher education has never been more important than it is today (Marshall, Adams, Cameron, & Sullivan, 2000). As the baby boomer generation prepares to leave the workforce, there will be a significant need for replacement leaders. Both Maguire (2005) and Jacobzone, Cambois, Chaplain, and Robine (1998) have reported that there is significant concern about the pool of qualified leaders in Academe due to age-related attrition. In fact, Maguire estimates that more than 50% of College Presidents are over the age of 60. This attrition problem most likely means that lower level managers will move through the ranks at a faster pace and will assume leadership positions with less experience than their predecessors. Kezar and Eckel (2004) identify four trends that are likely to make governance in higher education more challenging in the future. The factors identified are "increased accountability and competition," "retiring faculty and staff," "more diverse faculty appointments," and "the need to respond efficiently to shorter decision time frames."

Although the need for leadership training and development in higher education would seem to be obvious, in practice the concept has not been fully embraced. Brown (2001) concluded that while business organizations spend considerable sums each year on programs to train and develop leaders, that approach seems to be "underutilized in most universities." In particular, higher education administrators, who sometimes receive little or no training when moving from an academic to an administrative position, could benefit from such training (Raines & Alberg, 2003). In fact, Anderson and Johnson (2006) state that most academic leaders learn their craft through on-the-job training rather than formal training and development programs; and Hoppe (2003) added additional emphasis by noting that department chairs are often selected from among peers on a rotational basis "with little or no (concern for) succession planning."

The lack of formal training in universities may be due to an under-appreciation of the value of leadership training. Marshall et al. (2000) asked Australian academic leader about their perceptions of leadership development needs in Academe. In response the individuals stated that they felt professional development was an important activity, but interestingly fewer than 50% felt that they themselves needed further training.

Given the anticipated need for increased numbers of higher-education administrators, and the apparent paucity of training for these administrators, in this study we examined two issues, (1) whether training is offered for new higher-education administrators, and (2) whether such training targets the enhancement of interpersonal skills and the management of self-defeating behaviors.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Participants and Measures

In an attempt to determine what sort of training programs are being offered to management (Department Chairs and other administrators) in Academe, Provost/Academic Affairs offices of 420 colleges or universities with AACSB International-accredited business schools were invited to participate in an online survey which asked whether or not their respective university offered any training for first-time administrators; and if so, the concepts covered by the training program. Of the 420 invitations sent out, 56 responses (a 13% response rate) were received.

The respondents were required to answer four broad questions: (1) Do you have a training program for first-level administrators (e.g., Department Chairs) at your university?; (2) What is the length of your training program?; (3) What is the format of your training program (face-to-face, online, or hybrid)?; and (4) Does your training program included any of the following items (Interpersonal Relations (examples: using an appropriate leadership style, building good working relationships, and overcoming problem personality issues such as arrogance, self-isolation, etc.); How to build and lead a team; How to change and adapt; How to meet unit objectives; and How to broaden horizons and think strategically)?

RESULTS

Based on the results of the online survey only 35 (62.5%) of the responding universities/colleges had some kind of training program available for first-level administrators. The training content

was wide-ranging but most often focused on the administrative aspects of being a Department Chair or other academic administrator. Less than half of the responding institutions (45%) included any type of interpersonal relationship topics in their training programs. Refer to Table 1 for examples of common issues that are covered in higher-education administrator training programs.

The length of these programs ranged from less than a day (28.6%) to more than 2 days (42.9%), with a majority of them (88.6%) conducted in a face-to-face format. Surprisingly, there were no fully online training programs offered, although some of the respondents indicated hybrid (face-to-face with some online components) programs.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our results support [the idea] that higher-education administrators are unlikely to receive leadership training, despite the existence of research showing a need for such training. Furthermore,

the training that is offered appears to be targeted toward general administrative issues such as the mechanics of running a department, budgeting, faculty evaluation, etc., rather than addressing the important factors of problems with interpersonal relations, particularly SDBs that may interfere with positive interpersonal relations.

Although individuals may initially be selected for leadership positions because of recognized potential related to either management or leadership skills (McCartney & Campbell, 2006), it is leadership issues that have most often been shown to be indicative of leader derailment (Rasch et al., 2008). This information leads us to the conclusion that one way to lessen the occurrence of derailment in an organization is to focus on development activities that directly address the root causes.

David Day in his study on leadership development (2001) makes an unusual but interesting distinction between the concepts of "leader development" and "leadership development." Day concludes that the distinction between the two is related to differences in their competence base. "Leader development" focuses on individual and intrapersonal skills that relate mostly to personality, self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation. On the other hand, "leadership development" focuses on relational and interpersonal skills such as trust, mutual respect, social awareness and social skills. Day's distinction between the two approaches to development dovetails nicely with much of the recent research on self-defeating behaviors (SDBs). In fact as previously stated, leader derailment is most likely to be product of a subset of self-defeating behaviors relating to how the leader interacts with others (Irani Williams et al., Forthcoming). The SDBs significantly related to derailment were all "interpersonal" behaviors while the "intrapersonal" and work-related SDBs that were identified in the study were not significantly related to derailment.

Day (2001: 605) suggests that any of the traditional approaches to development (360 degree feedback, coaching, mentoring, developmental assignments, etc.) can be applied to either "leader development" or "leadership development." However, he states that the difference between the two is "more than mere semantics." He goes

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF COMMON ISSUES COVERED IN HIGHER-EDUCATION ADMINISTRATOR TRAINING PROGRAMS
Budgeting
Faculty evaluation
Planning
Promotion and tenure
Contract compliance
Campus specific issues and campus initiatives
Working with administration
Curriculum management
Resource management
Legal issues and how to handle them
FERPA and state laws
Governance
SACS accreditation
Internationalization
Sexual Harassment and HR issues
Mission and assessment
Mechanics of running a department

on to say that "at the core of the difference is an orientation toward developing human capital (leader development) as compared with social capital (leadership development)."

This seemingly minor distinction becomes important since it gives us insight as to how to design appropriate training programs for academic leaders. If the goal is to lessen the occurrence of derailment, then our first recommendation would be that universities/colleges should provide their first-time administrators with training and development activities to better prepare them for their new roles. In addition to administrative topics, development programs ought to stress topics related to interpersonal behaviors (leadership development). Interpersonal topics such as team building, coaching and counseling, conflict management, managing change, etc. should have a prominent place in any training program designed to prepare academics for leadership. If cost is a consideration, then online training programs could be considered, even though they may not be optimal for training in interpersonal skills.

The evidence we found for low rates of training in interpersonal skills indicates that further research in this area is warranted. Additionally, an issue that was not covered in our survey, but one that should be addressed in future research, is whether leadership training, if provided, is mandatory for higher-education administrators. Similarly, according to one of our survey respondents, there is at least one state that provides leadership training for academic administrators at a state-wide level; however, there was no indication about whether this training was mandatory or optional for each public institution in that state. Knowledge regarding the number of other states which offer such programs, as well as their content, and whether they are mandatory would also be helpful.

In closing, with the expected shortage in the supply of high-potential academic administrators, it is imperative to ensure that these individuals are fully equipped for success in their new positions. The results of this study indicate that training and development of academic administrators, particularly first-timers, that includes a strong focus on enhancing interpersonal skills is one key element in decreasing the likelihood of leader derailment; and ought to be a high priority with universities/colleges looking to build good reputation and successful programs.

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