

Article Review

Building Social Capital through Leadership Development Context

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1. Introduction

Cynthia Robert's research article entitled "Building Social Capital through Leadership Development" is an impressive piece of work in which she relates the benefits enjoyed by one healthcare system through appropriate exploitation of a mechanism called *social capital*. The two other factors that help *social capital* to enhance its effects are *leadership development* and *action learning*, all of which function coordinately to bring about the individual and organizational success of that healthcare system. In fact, what that healthcare system has done through a program called 'The LEAD Program' is a clear manifestation of the motto 'One for all, all for one'. To give her the credit she rightly deserves without mincing words, the researcher has done a great job of putting such a vehemently important and sophisticated success story in a nutshell.

2. Components of the LEAD Program

Needless to say, the three factors that the researcher has described in her research article are the ones both individuals and organizations striving for success should pay heed to, or to put it even more succinctly, follow. Social capital, if I assume right, is a term for which many ordinary readers may have various interpretations. Personally, I myself had previously thought it to be what a person possessed in a society like friends, relatives and their abilities and qualifications. After reading the article, I found out that my guess was not exactly correct. The researcher seemed to understand the tendency in which people can misinterpret this word and, therefore, has attempted to make the meaning of the word clear by providing several appropriate references.

From all the relevant definitions I could see in the article, I finally arrived at my own conclusion that *social capital* is something similar to abilities and resources a person possesses to maintain rapport with other people with whom he or she has either direct or indirect professional relationship. Putnam's suggestion (2001) of two types of *social capital*, namely 'Bonding social capital' and 'Bridging social capital' appears to be related to the ones I understand as direct or indirect professional relationship. Since *leadership development* and *action learning* are the two factors that help maximize the effects of using

social capital in bringing about success, she has also quoted a sufficient amount of references to make their meanings clear to the readers. From them, I came to know that *leadership development* means developing the mind to put whatever resources a person possesses to use for the benefits of the larger organization in which he or she is a part or member, rather than adopting an attitude that just following the order of the leader is enough for an ordinary member or employee. In other words, it is a move from individual leadership to group leadership. *Action learning*, on the other hand, means trying to learn about an issue or situation through personally experiencing it. Knowledge is derived from collective experiences which a person, group or organization can exploit for their benefits. Thus, it is understood that success, be it individual or organizational, depends on the systemic correlation among these three: *social capital*, *leadership* and *action plan*.

3. The Researcher's Observations

The healthcare system that the writer has researched into is found to have followed the principles and procedures of the above-mentioned three factors to the letter in the running of its *LEAD* program (The Leadership Education and Development Program), which aimed at developing leadership at all levels for increased personal and organizational effectiveness. Program participants totaling 110 individuals came from all disciplines within Health Systems and represented a variety of departments. Judging from the way they initiated this program whereby members were given an opportunity to share learning, give and receive feedback, and develop action plans for the future, *action learning* is found to be the underlying principle of this program.

Working collaboratively with members of the administrative team, the researcher conveniently employed an action oriented approach, or *action research*, to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. From a series of the program's workshop sessions held on a regular basis, she discovered that members were given an opportunity to learn new concepts, share issues, and collaborate to solve problems, become more familiar with larger organizational issues, and become better acquainted with each other. The sessions ended with the participants giving feedback and offering ideas for subsequent sessions, which were shared with members of administration to refine the format and content as necessary. From a group of active managers who met monthly during lunchtime over a five-month period (a group known as *Lunchtime Inquiry Group*), it was learnt that they were those who tried to create a more intimate setting to delve into the collaborative learning process, explore issues around leadership, garner feedback about the formal LEAD programming, and gain insight into larger organizational issues. The program also included a series of periodic meetings where the participants met with administration personnel to share and clarify findings, and to determine additional areas of study. The author also had one-on-one dialogues with 11 participants to gather their insights, impressions, key elements learned, and suggestions, all of which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for key themes. The author then recorded her personal observations and reflections immediately after each session for further analysis.

4. Outcomes of the Program

The researcher divided her findings in three categories; namely, *individual leader development*, *intragroup development* and *intergroup/ organization development*. Individual

leader development includes knowledge acquisition (i.e. change management, change processes, reconceptualization of leadership, appreciation of diversity) and skill development, behavioral changes (better communication/ listening skills, more involvement, delegation and empowerment of staff, change in leadership style/ approach). Intragroup development includes improvement on teamwork and trust. Intergroup/organization development includes creation of connections, better interdepartmental communication and process improvements. In short, the researcher found out that the *LEAD Program* not only enhances individual effectiveness, but also serves to build relationships, coordinate actions, and extend and strengthen the social network.

5. Discussion on Some of the Researcher's Overall Assessments

Naturally, the researcher's assessments are based on her findings, which are the achievements the *LEAD Program* has made. At the end of her research article, she remarked that development has emerged in this organization in a manner that includes the growth of individual leaders as well as the development of collective *leadership capacity* and *social capital*. Therefore, it can be said that the *LEAD program* has produced quite a number of good results. However, one particular quote she has used in her article and some other knowledge I have gained from other sources with regard to the area of her study make me wonder if her finding can be a hundred percent foolproof. At one point, she quotes Putnam and Adler & Kwon who assert that negative manifestations of *social capital* can result in ethnocentrism, sectarianism, corruption and the inhibition of innovation or risk taking (Putnam, 2001; Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Besides, there are many other researchers who have questioned the merits of action learning and social capital. For example, Cho and Egan (2009) cite a number of authors in support of the view that striking a balance between action and learning is "one of the greatest challenges to participants in action learning" (Cho and Egan, 2009:432). Harrison (2009) asserts that "...I found the concept to have a poorly tested evidence base and identified wide variations in the way it is interpreted and implemented" (Harrison, 2009:122-123). On the other hand, there are equal numbers of researchers who have shown their misgivings concerning *social capital*. Wall et al. (1998) state that *Social capital* can become a constraint to individuals' actions and choices. For example, there is a particularly high risk of negative social capital in urban poverty situations (Small 2002). Aldridge et al. (2002) elaborate further by saying that the same characteristics of social capital that enable beneficial, productive benefits have the potential to cause negative externalities. Potential downsides of *social capital* include: fostering behavior that worsens rather than improving economic performance; acting as a barrier to social inclusion and social mobility; dividing rather than uniting communities or societies; facilitating rather than reducing crime, education underachievement and health-damaging behavior. All these quotes leave me with only two options to respond to the writer's conclusion: whether to take the success story of that *LEAD program* for granted or to accept it with some reservation. However, the fact that she can come up with a sound assessment of the program's outcomes depicting progresses occurred at both individual and collective levels with accurate figures convinced me that the program may have been a fruitful one.

6. Conclusion

Realistically speaking, no approach or technique can be a hundred percent faultless or foolproof, especially when a project involves people from all strata of society. The inability to invest time and money may also derail *action learning*. What cannot be denied, however, is that *action learning*, if well connected with *leadership development* and *social capital* like the one in that *LEAD program*, may provide better results for both individuals and organizations. To quote Charlotte Bunch, the founding director and senior scholar at the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, "We do not need, and indeed never will have, all the answers before we act. It is often through taking action that we can discover some of them."

7. The Author

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8. References

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