

## Possible selves and career transitioning to leadership

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### Abstract

Moving to a leadership position is a profound career transition, which often leads to a changed identity. This presentation looks at how working directly with identity development, through the lens of possible selves, can help make transitions to leadership successful.

Although leadership is 'sexy', research has often focussed on theoretical descriptions rather than practical ways of developing it (Zaccaro & Horn, 2004). For instance, leaders are often encouraged to be transformational – by eliciting trust, admiration and respect from followers. They do this by evoking strong emotions and identification of the followers with the leader. But learning to do this authentically may require a changed self concept. Career development practice may have a lot to offer because it often deals with the self concept and the stress and doubts that often accompany career transitions, and leadership.

This paper will explore the links, and gaps, between possible selves and transformational and other leadership models.

### Introduction

This paper is the start of what we hope will be a larger research exercise looking at practical approaches for a possible selves based view of leadership development. We are particularly interested in how aspects of transformational leadership are developed because of its apparent effectiveness in raising performance and well-being for both leaders and followers (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Walumba, Avolio & Zhu, 2008). For leaders, we look specifically at the idea of possible selves coaching as a means of accelerating transformational leadership development.

We think the possible selves approach has a good fit with leadership development because it elicits deeper learning, fosters more authentic relationships with others, and provides motivation to persist with the difficult task of becoming a leader. Followers also benefit from transformational leadership. It helps them experience their jobs as having higher

autonomy, meaning, significance and variety (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Transformational leadership seems particularly effective at raising task performance and organisational citizenship behaviours - discretionary acts by followers that are not in formal job descriptions and appraisal systems.

Transformational leadership is usually contrasted against transactional leadership, which focuses on the exchanges between leaders and members. In contrast transformational leadership asserts that leader behaviours can raise followers to a higher level of thinking by appealing to ideals, values, a vision of the future, and new ways of thinking about problems (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). More specifically the four dimensions of transformational leader behaviour are:

- idealised influence - which concerns leader behaviours that get followers to identify with them;
- inspirational motivation – which concerns how all leaders articulate appealing visions to followers;
- intellectual stimulation – which concerns leaders’ ability to challenge assumptions, and get ideas from followers;
- individualised consideration – which concerns leaders’ attention to followers’ needs, and how they act as mentors or coaches and listen to concerns (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006).

Transformational leadership seems to be effective in improving performance outcomes by raising confidence, sense of empowerment, control, decision latitude and trust. Another pathway is identification with the workplace, which raises motivation and resiliency in followers (Walumbwa, Avolio & Zhu, 2008).

Although the material written on leadership is enormous, there is surprisingly little on how to develop leaders. Tseng, Tung, Duan (2008) mapped the intellectual structure of modern leadership studies and found that just under 17 per cent was on leadership theory and development (and the main articles all seem to be about theory, rather than development). So there is still an awful lot of work to be done about how to develop effective leaders. Career practitioners may have a lot to offer in this field.

This lack of knowledge of effectiveness is probably because doing such research is hard, and often under-rewarded from a researcher’s perspective. From the moderate body of knowledge about effective careers research we know that career help is comparable in effectiveness to medical research in effectiveness, that short interventions can be as effective as longer ones, and that a combination of tools, and one on one ‘face to face’ work may provide the most time efficient effort-for-gain ratio (ref). Internet based tools seem to have a strange effect in encouraging candidness and collecting a lot of information quickly.

Person contact seems effective in developing insight and challenge. Other components that seem particularly effective include (from Brown et al., 2003):

- Workbooks and written exercises that require participants to write goals, plans and analysis of occupations;
- Individualised interpretations and feedback on test results and goals etc
- World of work information in session
- Exposure to models of decision making and implementation
- Support for participants to build understanding or build support for choices and plans

Of course, there are dangers in assuming that what works in career development will also work in leadership development. The people, context, outcomes and intrapersonal processes are different. But it is feasible that workbooks on goals and plans can help clarify and crystallise thoughts; individualised support and feedback from someone else could help do this; job and work knowledge will help develop the domain specific skills needed for effective leadership; models for decision-making and implementation would be useful, particularly for new leaders when leadership tasks are novel; and support from peers and followers would probably help as well. Both career development and leadership share a focus on learning and making decisions about the self and the world of work, self development and change, and tasks that challenge existing self concepts.

### **Leadership development practice**

Traditional approaches to leadership development focused on skills, which were often expressed in quite behaviourist terms (Pearce, 2007). This approach was appealing because the skills could be taught relatively quickly and easily. More recently, leadership development has begun to focus on identity, because to sustain interest for the amount of time required to practice and develop complex skills, the leadership role needs to become part of identity (Pearce, 2007).

Emerging leaders need to be able to access content about leadership knowledge, and be able to use it. As leadership tasks are highly personalised, social, and often have a long arc (of say, establishing oneself as a leader) emerging leaders need to identify with the role and be confident enough to try development activities. They need social acceptance and task success in order to build skills and a leadership self-concept. As self concepts and identity influence what we in turn notice, remember, and process, and how we interact with others, they have a lot to do with leadership.

Identity and self-concept are two very similar (or identical) ideas, although the former was traditionally claimed by sociologists (and emphasised social aspects), and the latter by

psychologists (who emphasised intra-personal aspects). Like leadership, they both share multiple definitions, and overlapping 'intellectual spaces' across different academic territories and doctrines. Rather than get caught up in definitional debates we will parallel Day and Harrison's (2007) comment on leadership definitions – both 'identity' and self concept' are so multidimensional and complex that simple, unitary definitions are not feasible. The focus here is on pragmatic working approaches that link to the cognitive science perspective. That perspective in turn takes us to the idea of possible selves.

### **Possible selves**

Classical modernist depictions of the self viewed the individual in relatively monolithic terms by emphasising stable personality-based traits (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In contrast, contemporary, modern theories of the self recognise greater plasticity in the self-concept, situational influences, capacity for change and the self being made up of a number of sub self- concepts (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Possible selves are a 'late modernist' idea in that they are empirically measurable and relative stability of the core self-concept is recognised, as is the role of human agency. There are, however, very strong constructivist and narrative themes in how possible selves are used by researchers and practitioners, and discussed with clients.

Possible selves represent the future tense of these multiple selves. Possible selves theory is a set of constructs that concern all the thoughts, images and senses a person has about their future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It defines the self-concept as multifaceted, and includes both cognitive and affective aspects of the self. Possible selves provide the meaning and values and social contexts that make goals meaningful (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007).

Possible selves are schematic cognitive representations of what people expect, hope or fear that they may become, and thus are guided strongly by expectancies about outcomes. Possible selves can maintain general themes but can alter in response to changes in the life course and other issues of context (Cross & Markus, 1991). Thus a possible self as 'successful' can evolve from a more specific self-representation, such as being a sports captain, to being a good employee, to being a good supervisor. Possible selves are also changeable, thus they can help with adapting to new positions (Savickas, 1993).

### **Possible selves, career development and leadership**

Possible selves have many benefits for career development and leadership. They are highly personalised, reflect highly personalised meanings and values, and so foster intrinsic motivation and learning goals. They include social identities such as class, gender and ethnicity and so reflect context. As they are often vivid, they provide the chance to vicariously experience tasks and practice skills needed to develop focus and concentration

and confidence. This envisaging also reduces distractions caused by stress, and develops self persuasion to overcome problems and persist with the objective of mind.

They are also very emotional, and consequently provide energy for tasks. Emotional possible selves, such as to be happy, act as goals in themselves. Possible selves are linked to schema, which can be described as the processes (like software) and content (like facts) that guide thinking (. In a sense they are like plays, with settings, characters, actions, and scripts. Each instantiation of that play (or activation of the schema) will vary according to the actors and theatre, although they would be similar because of the text (Rumelhart, 1980). Schemas guide what we notice (allow into consciousness), how we process information (associate things with it) and what we remember (such as recall of old information from memory) (Leahey & Harris, 1993).

For example, a well-developed possible self as an effective, thoughtful and respected leader would more likely notice information relating to that self and act on it. In contrast, an aschematic leader would pre-consciously screen out such information as not relevant, or not remember it, or process it poorly. An analogy is buying a new car. When you are driving it home, having financially and psychologically purchased it, suddenly, you notice how many other cars there are like it.

These benefits extend into unconscious decision-making. For important and complex decisions they provide goals, which enable subconscious thought processes to act more effectively. Elaborate hoped-for selves have also been found to raise confidence and to help with planning (Dijksterhuis, & Nordgren, 2006). Possible selves provide meaning to otherwise mundane, familiar tasks or novel tasks (such as giving feedback on a subordinate's work). A possible selves approach can help motivation, the storage of information, and remembering (its recall into working memory) (Plimmer & Smith et al., 1999).

### **Practitioner approaches**

From a leadership or career practitioner perspective possible selves are usually worked with by identifying what is hoped, feared and expected across various important life domains. Present and past selves - where people are at now and where they have come from - are also explored so that the journey from the past and present to the future is understood. Possible selves that are hoped-for, likely, feel true, are emotionally rich, and reflect the context of people's lives are identified and elaborated. Gaps between present and future hoped-for selves are then identified and plans made accordingly.

### **Emerging leader experiences**

From a client perspective leadership evolves from the trying on of provisional selves that are accepted, altered or discarded in response to internal and external feedback. From this, ideally, personalised behaviours that come across to followers as authentic and conveying good values should emerge. This in turn should help leaders behave in ways that cause

followers to identify with them; convey appealing visions; challenge assumptions and get ideas from followers, and act as mentors and listen to concerns.

This process of emerging into a leader can be described as transition narratives that include the three stages of separation, transition and incorporation (Ibarra, 2007). The *separation* phase can be triggered by title change, dissatisfaction, or changes in one's reference group. The *transition* stage is an 'in-between stage'. There are often multiple self definitions, which are often incompatible and associated with concern about long-term trajectories. This stage often involves (Ibarra, ):

- trying things out
- experiential, voluntary learning
- trying on provisional identities and getting internal and external feedback
- adaptation by balancing behavioural scripts and negotiation

Good operating rules that practitioners and coaches can try and foster in this stage are psychological safety, suspension and play-like activities (Ibarra, 2005). Coaches can be guiding features and reference groups are very important. An often critical task at this stage is to shift reference group.

Risks in the stage are high. Backsliding can be mitigated by more preparation, more action, and a sense of progress toward the possible self. Momentum is obviously important. Career derailment can occur when emerging leaders continue to do old tasks that confirm present identity, rather than new tasks that confirm future selves and identity (Lombardo & McCauley, 1988). The new relationship responsibilities that accompany leadership is another area of risk. Emerging leaders often feel false in their interactions with others, as their self-concept catches up with their new job. Often there is a trigger, such as a seminal event that triggers rejection of old identities and self-concept and propels movement to the new self-concept or identity (Ibarra, 1999). These threshold events seem surprisingly common in the career transition literature. It would be interesting to study them in the careers literature.

In the *incorporation* stage stronger self identity for sustenance emerges. Conflicting or competing selves and identities are either rejected, assimilated or incorporated. The organisational identity describes this as the integration of personal and work-placed identities into a professional identity. As these identities or selves are formed the attached schemas become more efficient and do much of the processing automatically. Less mental load and energy are needed to make decisions, freeing up cognitive resources for creativity and finding novel solutions to problems (Lord & Hall, 2005). As incorporation takes place, emerging leaders can organise problems they experience, and the observations they make, into increasingly higher-level identity-based systems that guide perceptions, knowledge and behaviours (Lord & Hall). Thus there is an upward spiral of more complex reasoning as personal identities, leadership roles, and skills become more strongly internalised into one's

sense of self. The new self identity provides an organising system for attaching meaning to leadership experiences. Lord and Hall argue that there is commonly a fundamental shift in leader identity from individual to more collective perspectives as expertise and identity develop.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, shifts in identity are important to the development of transformational leadership because of the benefits they bring to thinking, relationships and resilience during the difficult phase of emerging as a leader. However, effective processes for developing transformational leaders are under-researched. Career practice can contribute because it is experienced and effective in dealing with identity and self concept decisions and implementation. A possible selves based approach seems to provide an effective approach to transformational leadership because of its fit with the self-concept and identity shifts that often take place when effective leaders emerge.

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