



Is training leaders in functional leadership a useful tool for improving the performance of leadership functions and team effectiveness?

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ABSTRACT

Departing from the functional leadership model, we propose a team leadership training model as a way to improve the performance of leadership functions and foster team effectiveness. Based on a longitudinal quasi-experimental study involving ninety 6-person teams, 45 trained leaders were compared to 45 untrained leaders at two points in time: before the intervention group was subjected to training experience (time 1), and 6 months after the intervention group had completed their training (time 2). Results showed that, compared to the non-trained leaders, the trained leaders registered an improvement in their enactment of leadership functions. Moreover, these results also showed that training leaders led to an improvement in team effectiveness through the development of team leadership functions. The current findings offer new insights into the way that leaders can improve team effectiveness.

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Theory and research concerning leadership, especially in the organizational context, suggest that leadership is an important factor that may affect work team processes and results (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Randall, Resick, & DeChurch, 2011). However, how leaders may improve a team's performance and effectiveness is a question that the literature has not been able to answer with precision (e.g., Kozlowski, Gully, McHugh, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 1996; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2002).

Given the ambiguity and complexity of current organizational environments, leadership cognitive activities – like solving complex problems involving the development of plans for organizing people and tasks, anticipating and evaluating the likely consequences, and generating innovative solutions – prove to be critical for leadership effectiveness (Antes & Mumford, 2012; Fleishman, Mumford, Levin, Korotkin, & Hein, 1991; Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). Therefore, if effective performance in leadership roles depends on cognition (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000), studying the cognitive activities inherent to leadership when a team must deal with problems and tasks, is crucial. In fact, as leaders help to generate solutions and provide direction when teams encounter problems, leader cognition is central to efficient team functioning in organizational settings (Antes & Mumford, 2012). According to Fleishman and colleagues (1991), the functional leadership approach views leadership behavior as representing “a form of organizationally-based problem solving”, a “social problem-solving syndrome involving many cognitive capacities in the generation, selection, and implementation of influence attempts” (p. 259).

Hence, some researchers (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004, 2006; DeChurch & Marks, 2006; Hackman & Wageman, 2009; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Morgeson et al., 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001) point to the functional leadership approach (Hackman & Walton, 1986; McGrath, 1962) as being important with regard to addressing some of the flaws presented in traditional theories

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used to study team leadership. Appealing to a team-centric view of leadership (Morgeson et al., 2010) and focusing on the interaction between the leader and the team (rather than dyadic leader–member interactions), this approach emphasizes the role of team leadership and “the cognitive substance of leadership” (Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, & Gilbert, 2000, p. 38), instead of leader characteristics, traits, or leadership styles. In fact, functional leadership is centered on goal oriented leadership activities that may promote team processes which are likely to drive team effectiveness. Moreover, this team leadership approach is centered on improving the effectiveness of task performing groups in organizational contexts, rather than addressing any abstract context. Furthermore, functional leadership theory has a high potential to be used as a framework for leaders' training programs (Hackman & Walton, 1986; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Zaccaro et al., 2001).

In the last two decades, there has been substantial investment in developing leadership research, in parallel with organizations' extensive creation of training programs (Dolezalek, 2004; Fulmer & Vicere, 1996; O'Leonard, 2010) and their increasing commitment to them (Conger & Benjamin, 1999). However, due to the complexity of the assessment and operationalization of leadership development (Collins, Lowe, & Arnett, 2000; McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1998), it has been difficult to characterize the kind of programs and interventions that may yield tangible improvements in leader performance (Fleishman et al., 1991), and consequently in organizational performance (Sogunro, 1997). Literature on evaluating the impact of managerial leadership development on organizational outcomes is scarce, particularly at the team level (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009; Burke & Day, 1986; Collins & Holton, 2004; Powell & Yalcin, 2010).

The present study aimed to test the impact a team leadership training program based on the theoretical functional leadership approach, would have on the performance of team leadership functions.

Drawing on the functional approach (McGrath, 1962) and the leadership model suggested by Zaccaro and colleagues (2001), this leadership training program was designed to develop the cognitive activities leaders need to foster in order to promote team-goal achievement while teams are dealing with task-related problems. This study did not analyze the potential team interaction or cognitive processes that might develop as a consequence of training in functional leadership, but only the impact of that training on a leader's performance of team leadership functions and, consequently, on team effectiveness with regard to task-related problem solving.

Our work is also a response to the call for more studies to assess the effect of leadership development on organizational outcomes. Thus, the present research will evaluate the effect of our leadership training program on team effectiveness. Finally, we tried to shed some light on the process through which leadership training influences team effectiveness. Hence, we tested the mediating role of cognitive leadership functions development to explain the impact training has on team effectiveness. To address these research objectives we used a quasi-experimental design using pre-test/post-test with a comparison group. The contribution this current study makes to the team leadership literature is threefold. First, we empirically tested the theoretical functional leadership approach with regard to developing the cognitive activities essential for a team leader to solve complex team work-related problems. As far as we know, there are no published studies on an empirical evaluation of the application of this theoretical model, or on its consequences regarding the performance of team leadership functions. Second, we also evaluated the impact of this leadership training on team effectiveness, which is rare in the literature. Third, by analyzing empirically the mediating role cognitive leadership functions play in team effectiveness, the study provides evidence that developing cognitive activities that enable team leadership functions is a way for leaders to promote team effectiveness.

In short, our study aimed to respond both to calls for more longitudinal studies and repeated measures and to find the mediating mechanisms that would explain the processes through which leadership cognitive interventions enhance team effectiveness (Avolio et al., 2009). While arguing that leadership cognition and the performance of leadership functions carried out by the leader (measured at the individual level) influence the performance of the team as a whole in the organizational context (measured at the team level), we address this process in a multi-level perspective.

In the following sections we first outline the literature from which we developed our research questions and derived our hypotheses. Then, after reporting the methods and results, we conclude with a general discussion of our findings and the theoretical and practical implications of our research.

Leadership training programs and team effectiveness

Leadership development was defined by McCauley and colleagues (1998) as “the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (p. 4). Leadership developmental interventions have used different general leadership theories such as: the leader match concept (Fiedler, Chemers, & Mahar, 1976), the decision making theory (Vroom & Jago, 1988), the situational leadership model (Hersey, Angelini, & Carakushansky, 1982), the leader–member exchange theory (Scandura & Graen, 1984) and the transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1990). However, Yukl (1998) pointed out that “most of the studies fail to establish whether improved effectiveness is the result of actually applying the theory, or merely the result of gaining more interpersonal and administrative skills” (p. 468).

Furthermore, Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) pointed out that those general leadership theories have “useful but indirect implications for team effectiveness” (p. 109) because they neglect unique features of the teams' task context and team leadership processes, through which leaders create conditions for the team to “synchronize their knowledge, skill, and effort to be effective as a team” (p. 109). These generalist and universalistic approaches do not adequately address team leadership requirements because they do not focus on how leaders “build and shape team development” (Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim, & Botero, 2009, p. 114). Moreover, traditional leadership theories tend “not to make the distinction between leader–subordinate interactions and leader–team interactions” (Zaccaro, Heinen, & Shuffler, 2009, p. 84). Thus, as Hackman and Walton (1986) pointed out “we have not found among

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