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

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A R T I C L E   I N F O
Article history:
Accepted 19 February 2015
Available online 6 April 2015

Editor: M. Mumford

Keywords:
Functional leadership
Leadership training
Team effectiveness

A B S T R A C T
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.

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, Friedric, 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 & Wagaman, 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.
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, 1986), 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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