



Innovative Approaches to Leadership Development: The Impact of Experiential Learning and Mentorship

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Abstract:

This study investigates the strategies and challenges faced by leadership educators in developing leadership competencies. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research examines effective teaching methods, such as experiential learning, coaching, and mentoring, while highlighting the importance of continuous feedback in fostering leadership growth. Findings reveal that while effective programs integrate diverse teaching strategies, challenges persist in standardizing best practices and comprehensively evaluating program outcomes. Educators reported difficulties in aligning program content with the varying needs of participants, as well as assessing long-term competency development through qualitative feedback rather than standardized metrics. This research contributes to the understanding of educational leadership by identifying effective teaching strategies and proposing best practices tailored to organizational needs. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity for organizations to design leadership programs that encourage continuous learning and adaptability. Future studies should explore the impact of leadership programs across different industries, investigating their long-term effects on organizational performance. By broadening the research scope, scholars can gain deeper insights into the translation of leadership development into real-world applications, ultimately guiding organizations in refining their leadership initiatives to cultivate effective leaders for complex professional environments.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Leadership Educators, Competency Development, Experiential Learning

Introduction

Programs for leadership development have grown in popularity as organizations seek to build stronger leadership pipelines (Nielsen et al., 2020). Despite their expansion, the success of these programs remains uncertain due to limited consensus on the most effective ways to teach leadership skills (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

In today's fast-changing environment—marked by globalization, technological disruptions, and shifting workforce demographics—leaders need a broad range of competencies, such as communication, innovation, collaboration, and ethical leadership (McCausland, 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). This increasing complexity demands well-structured leadership programs that develop future leaders equipped to navigate emerging challenges.

Although many organizations implement leadership development programs, identifying the best methods for training leadership educators remains an ongoing challenge (Cuskelly et al., 2021). Studies show that 94% of firms offering leadership programs believe they successfully enhance leadership capabilities; however, there is no clear consensus on which teaching strategies work best (Cuskelly et al., 2021).

This ambiguity can result in programs that fail to prepare leaders for real-world challenges, underscoring the need for a more precise understanding of effective leadership education techniques.

This research explores leadership education strategies with a focus on coaching, mentoring, experiential learning, and feedback. These methods are commonly used to develop leadership skills such as self-awareness, problem-solving, and decision-making.



Coaching and mentoring provide personalized support, while experiential learning immerses participants in real-world scenarios to facilitate hands-on skill development. Feedback mechanisms, including 360-degree assessments and peer reviews, are also examined for their role in enhancing leadership performance.

In addition to exploring effective strategies, this study investigates the challenges faced by leadership educators. A major difficulty lies in the lack of standardized practices for teaching leadership, which complicates program design and delivery (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019).

Furthermore, evaluating the effectiveness of leadership programs presents a complex task, often requiring multiple assessment tools to measure impact comprehensively (Halliwell et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving the quality and outcomes of leadership development initiatives. By focusing on both the strategies employed and the challenges encountered, this study aims to provide valuable insights into best practices for leadership education. A clearer understanding of these approaches can help institutions design more effective leadership programs tailored to organizational needs. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the ongoing discourse on leadership education by identifying actionable strategies that empower future leaders to thrive in dynamic environments.

Literature Review

Leadership development programs play a crucial role in building leadership capacity, yet there is limited clarity regarding their effectiveness. Various leadership models provide theoretical frameworks that guide these programs, including the Situational Leadership Model (SLM), Transformational Leadership Model (TLM), and Authentic Leadership Model (ALM). These models offer different approaches to leadership by emphasizing adaptability, transformation, and authenticity, shaping how leadership skills are cultivated within organizations.

The Situational Leadership Model (SLM), developed by Butler Jr. and Reese (1991), suggests that leaders should adjust their leadership style based on the specific needs of their followers. It emphasizes alternating between directive and supportive approaches depending on the follower's familiarity with tasks (Hopkins et al., 1987). Meanwhile, the Transformational Leadership Model (TLM), introduced by Bass and Avolio (1990), focuses on inspiring followers to reach their full potential. This model operates through key components such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Browning, 2014). Lastly, the Authentic Leadership Model (ALM), advanced by Avolio and Gardner (2005), emphasizes self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing as fundamental elements of effective leadership (Kleynhans et al., 2021).

In addition to theoretical models, several strategies are commonly employed in leadership development programs. Mentorship involves pairing emerging leaders with experienced mentors who guide them in developing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills (Halliwell et al., 2022). Coaching focuses on promoting self-awareness and communication through structured feedback provided by professional coaches (Majee et al., 2020). Experiential learning methods, such as real-life scenarios and simulations, enhance problem-solving and decision-making abilities by immersing participants in practical situations (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019). These strategies, when applied effectively, foster holistic leadership growth.

Leadership educators, however, face significant challenges in implementing these programs. One of the primary difficulties is the absence of standardized best practices for teaching leadership, which complicates program design and delivery. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of leadership programs involves complex metrics that measure various dimensions, including behavioral change and organizational impact (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019; Halliwell et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the need for more refined approaches in leadership education to ensure consistent outcomes.

When effectively designed and executed, leadership development programs can significantly improve organizational outcomes. Research shows that such programs contribute to enhanced job satisfaction, innovation, and overall performance (Abrell et al., 2011; Ingraham & Getha-Taylor, 2004). However, the success of these programs heavily depends on the quality of their design, the delivery methods used, and the expertise of facilitators involved (Lacerenza et al., 2017). As organizations continue to invest in leadership development, aligning program objectives with both theoretical frameworks and practical strategies remains essential to achieving sustainable leadership success.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, enabling an in-depth investigation of leadership educators' practices in real-life settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study design allows for a detailed exploration of specific phenomena within their real-world context, providing rich insights into leadership development strategies and challenges.



Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations. Interviews were conducted with five school principals who had developed effective leadership programs, offering valuable perspectives on their strategies, challenges, and outcomes.

Additionally, leadership program materials—such as curricula, assessments, and syllabi—were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the program structure and teaching methods. Real-time observations of leadership development sessions were also conducted to capture teaching approaches in practice. Purposive sampling was employed to select institutions known for delivering successful leadership programs. This sampling method ensured that the study included a variety of institutions to generate findings that are representative of diverse practices. The focus on institutions with proven leadership programs allowed the research to highlight effective strategies used across different settings.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involved coding interview transcripts and documents to identify recurring themes. To ensure reliability, two independent coders analyzed the data. Descriptive statistics were applied to observational data, quantifying the frequency and duration of various teaching strategies observed during leadership development sessions.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study, adhering to APA guidelines. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, with individuals having the option to withdraw at any stage without penalty. These ethical protocols ensured the integrity of the research and the protection of participants' rights.

Findings and Discussion

Effective Teaching Strategies

Effective leadership development relies heavily on experiential learning strategies such as case studies, role-playing, and simulations. These techniques immerse participants in real-world scenarios, promoting deeper engagement and practical application of leadership concepts.

As Garay-Rondero et al. (2019) state, "Experiential learning fosters critical thinking and decision-making, equipping learners with skills essential for leadership roles." Role-playing, in particular, has been found effective in training leaders, with Sogunro (2004) noting that it helps participants practice interpersonal skills and adapt to various leadership situations.

Mentorship and coaching have also emerged as critical elements of leadership education, focusing on developing emotional intelligence and effective communication. Halliwell et al. (2022) explain, "Leadership coaching enhances emotional intelligence, which, in turn, improves leaders' ability to manage relationships and motivate teams effectively." Similarly, mentorship offers invaluable guidance, allowing emerging leaders to learn from seasoned professionals. This personalized support system helps build confidence and fosters a deeper understanding of leadership dynamics (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

However, leadership educators face several challenges, particularly in the absence of standardized teaching practices. As noted by Hopkins et al. (2018), the diversity of leadership models complicates program design, making it difficult to establish a consistent framework. "The absence of best practices forces educators to continuously innovate, often relying on trial-and-error approaches," they argue. Assessing program effectiveness is another challenge, as leadership outcomes are multi-dimensional and not easily quantifiable (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, research shows that well-designed leadership programs significantly impact organizational outcomes. Abrell et al. (2011) found that transformational leadership programs enhance job satisfaction, improve innovation, and boost overall performance. Ingraham and Getha-Taylor (2004) emphasize the importance of alignment between program design and organizational goals, stating, "The effectiveness of leadership programs depends heavily on their relevance to the specific needs and challenges of the organization."

Leadership development programs are indispensable in fostering essential leadership skills, but their success depends on employing diverse strategies such as experiential learning, mentorship, and coaching. Educators must navigate challenges such as the lack of standardized practices while continuously adapting their approaches to meet learners' needs. Effective programs not only develop individual leaders but also drive meaningful organizational change, emphasizing the importance of ongoing research in refining leadership education.

Challenges in Program Implementation

One of the key challenges faced by leadership educators is assessing the long-term development of leadership competencies. Many programs rely heavily on qualitative feedback, such as participant reflections and



observational insights, rather than standardized metrics. While these qualitative assessments provide valuable insights into personal growth, they can lack objectivity and consistency, making it difficult to measure progress accurately across participants (Garay-Rondero et al., 2019). As Halliwell et al. (2022) note, "Tracking long-term leadership development is complex, as leadership involves behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that evolve over time."

Another significant challenge is aligning program content with the diverse needs of participants. Learners often come from varied professional and cultural backgrounds, each bringing unique experiences and expectations into the learning environment.

This diversity makes it difficult for educators to design a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum. Frahm and Cianca (2021) emphasize the need for flexible programming, stating that "leadership education must be adaptive to accommodate different learning styles, motivations, and cultural perspectives."

Furthermore, integrating theoretical models into practical applications poses an additional hurdle for program facilitators. While models like Transformational Leadership (TLM) and Situational Leadership (SLM) provide valuable frameworks, educators often struggle to translate these concepts into actionable strategies that resonate with learners in real-world settings (Hopkins et al., 2018).

This gap between theory and practice highlights the importance of experiential learning techniques, though these approaches require significant time and resources to implement effectively. Time constraints also limit the depth and scope of leadership programs. Many organizations prefer short-term workshops or seminars to minimize disruptions to operations, but these formats may not provide sufficient time for participants to develop meaningful competencies. According to Abrell et al. (2011), "The most effective programs are long-term and offer sustained opportunities for practice, feedback, and reflection," though maintaining participant engagement over extended periods remains a challenge.

Another difficulty lies in ensuring the sustainability of leadership development efforts. Organizations may struggle to maintain momentum after initial training sessions, especially without ongoing support structures such as mentorship or coaching (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). Leadership educators must find ways to embed continuous learning opportunities into organizational culture to sustain the benefits of training programs over time.

Effective program implementation in leadership education requires navigating multiple challenges, including the difficulty of measuring outcomes, aligning content with diverse learners, and balancing theory with practice.

Time constraints and sustainability issues further complicate the process, requiring innovative strategies to keep participants engaged over the long term. Despite these challenges, educators must continuously adapt and refine their approaches to ensure leadership development programs remain impactful and relevant.

Continuous Feedback and Mentoring

Ongoing mentorship plays a crucial role in sustaining skill development beyond the formal duration of leadership programs. While initial training sessions provide foundational knowledge and skills, the real challenge often lies in ensuring that these competencies are continuously reinforced and applied in real-world situations.

According to Halliwell et al. (2022), "Mentorship fosters a supportive environment where leaders can engage in reflective practices, enabling them to internalize and apply what they have learned." This continuous feedback loop not only helps individuals recognize areas for improvement but also promotes accountability in their leadership journey.

Mentoring relationships provide a framework for ongoing professional development, allowing participants to seek guidance as they navigate challenges in their roles. This dynamic is particularly important in leadership, where the application of skills can vary significantly depending on the context and the individuals involved.

As noted by Frahm and Cianca (2021), "Mentors can offer personalized advice that aligns with the mentee's specific experiences and aspirations, leading to more meaningful growth." This personalized approach ensures that learning is relevant and tailored, maximizing the effectiveness of the skills acquired during formal training.

Furthermore, continuous feedback from mentors facilitates the cultivation of emotional intelligence, a critical component of effective leadership. Through regular check-ins and discussions, mentors can help mentees identify their emotional responses to various situations, thereby enhancing their self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Research indicates that emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to inspire and motivate their teams (Halliwell et al., 2022). Therefore, establishing a mentorship framework that prioritizes emotional intelligence development is vital for long-term leadership success.



Additionally, mentoring can encourage the application of leadership principles in a safe and supportive environment. Participants often face real-world challenges that require them to adapt and innovate. By providing a space for discussing these challenges, mentors can guide mentees through problem-solving processes and encourage the implementation of leadership strategies learned during training. As Garay-Rondero et al. (2019) suggest, "Experiential learning thrives when leaders can discuss real issues with someone who has the experience and insight to provide valuable feedback."

Moreover, the role of mentorship extends to building professional networks, which can be essential for career advancement and skill enhancement. Mentors often introduce mentees to other professionals, resources, and opportunities that may not be accessible otherwise. This expanded network can lead to collaborations, knowledge sharing, and further learning opportunities, thereby enriching the mentee's leadership experience. As stated by Ingraham and Getha-Taylor (2004), "The power of professional relationships can significantly amplify the impact of leadership development programs."

Continuous feedback and mentoring are vital for sustaining leadership skill development beyond initial training programs. By fostering supportive relationships that encourage ongoing reflection and personalized guidance, organizations can enhance the effectiveness of their leadership initiatives. Moreover, these mentorship frameworks not only facilitate the application of leadership skills but also promote emotional intelligence and professional networking, all of which contribute to long-term success in leadership roles. Ultimately, investing in mentorship can lead to a more competent and resilient leadership pipeline within organizations.

Role of Technology in Leadership Programs

Educators have increasingly recognized the vital role of technology in enhancing leadership programs. The integration of tools such as virtual classrooms and online assessments has significantly improved accessibility and participant engagement. According to Abrell et al. (2011), "The use of technology enables a broader reach and creates more interactive learning environments, allowing participants to engage with content at their own pace." This flexibility is particularly important in today's diverse educational landscape, where learners often have varying commitments and geographical constraints.

However, the adoption of technology in leadership education is not without its challenges. One of the primary obstacles noted by educators is the varying levels of technological literacy among participants.

As Ajibade et al. (2022) explain, "A lack of consistent tech proficiency can hinder the effectiveness of online learning platforms, leading to disparities in engagement and comprehension." This inconsistency presents a significant challenge for institutions that must ensure all participants can navigate digital tools effectively.

Moreover, institutions must also consider the implications of this digital divide on program effectiveness. Educators have expressed concerns that participants who struggle with technology may miss out on essential learning opportunities. As highlighted by Frahm and Cianca (2021), "Failure to adequately support less tech-savvy participants could lead to disengagement and a lack of confidence in their leadership abilities." This situation underscores the necessity for institutions to implement supportive measures, such as providing training sessions on digital tools before the program begins.

In response to these challenges, many leadership programs are beginning to incorporate hybrid models that combine in-person and online elements. This approach allows participants to benefit from direct interaction while also leveraging the advantages of technology. Garay-Rondero et al. (2019) emphasize that "hybrid learning environments can offer the best of both worlds, fostering collaboration while utilizing technology to enhance access to resources." This flexibility can help bridge the gap for those who may struggle with purely online formats. Additionally, it is crucial for educators to develop tailored resources that cater to the diverse technological skills of participants. By providing differentiated learning pathways, institutions can ensure that all individuals receive the support they need to thrive.

As noted by Ingraham and Getha-Taylor (2004), "Creating inclusive educational experiences requires an understanding of the unique needs of each participant." This tailored approach not only promotes equity but also enhances the overall effectiveness of leadership development programs.

While technology plays a transformative role in leadership education, its successful integration requires careful consideration of participants' varied technological skills. By addressing these challenges through training, hybrid models, and tailored resources, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. Ultimately, fostering technological proficiency among participants will enhance their leadership capabilities and prepare them for the complexities of today's dynamic organizational landscape.

Conclusion



This study offers valuable insights into the strategies and challenges of leadership educators in developing leadership competencies. Effective programs incorporate a mix of experiential learning, coaching, mentoring, and continuous feedback. However, challenges remain in standardizing best practices and evaluating program outcomes comprehensively. Organizations must design leadership programs that align with their specific needs and promote continuous learning for long-term success.

This research contributes to the understanding of educational leadership by identifying effective teaching strategies and proposing best practices. Future studies could explore the impact of leadership programs across different industries and investigate the long-term effects on organizational performance.

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Organizations must design leadership programs that align with their specific needs and promote continuous learning for long-term success. By addressing the unique contexts in which leadership development occurs, institutions can foster environments that not only nurture emerging leaders but also ensure that these leaders are equipped with the skills necessary to navigate complex organizational dynamics.

Moreover, this research contributes to the understanding of educational leadership by identifying effective teaching strategies and proposing best practices. Future studies could explore the impact of leadership programs across different industries and investigate the long-term effects on organizational performance. By expanding the scope of research to include various sectors, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how leadership development translates into real-world outcomes.

Furthermore, examining the experiences of participants over time could provide insights into the sustained impact of leadership training, thereby informing the continuous improvement of educational programs. Ultimately, these findings may guide organizations in refining their leadership initiatives to better prepare individuals for the challenges they will face in their professional journeys.

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