

The journey of applied leadership through a structured leadership and management development programme

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Abstract

This paper examines whether or not delegates who successfully complete a structured leadership and management development intervention alter some of their existing leadership and management practices and/or implement some of the newly acquired knowledge and skills back in the workplace.

A sample of 13 participants who successfully completed this programme between 2012 and 2013 at a large South African university provided insight into their experiences of the transfer of training regarding these practices. Conducting a thematic analysis of the narratives revealed that most delegates applied a myriad leadership practices that supported the intended outcomes of the leadership programme that they had completed.

In their endeavours to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills, the study revealed many factors that hampered and/or enhanced the implementation of these leadership practices. This study found that the main motivation for the application of these new practices were self-initiated and reside only within the immediate sphere of the respondent's own influence, that is his or her colleagues and team members. It was also discovered that environmental factors, such as the line manager's involvement and the existing and predominant culture and climate of the institution, once again inhibit and/or promotes the transfer of training in the workplace.

Key phrases

building tomorrow's leaders programme; developmental opportunities; environmental factors; knowledge transfer; leadership practices; learning opportunities; motivational factors; skills transfer; talent development; transfer of training

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are constantly faced with increasing student numbers and are required to deliver quality education. This challenge requires highly motivated and competent professional and administrative staff in support of an organisation's core business (Riccio 2010:7). The investment in the development of these employees plays a pivotal role in this regard (Lee 2007:2). Exposing these professional and administrative staff members to the most appropriate training and development opportunities not only motivates employees but also contributes towards maximising organisational effectiveness (Kraiger & Ford 2007:281; Senge 1990:144).

A key factor in achieving organisational effectiveness is the ability of employees to transfer the knowledge and skills gained from these relevant training interventions back to the workplace. The success of this transfer of learning is, in many cases, dependent on adequate behaviour change and applied workplace practices. This in itself is seen as a major challenge for many organisations.

A study conducted by Georgenson (1982:75), found that only 10 per cent of total training expenditure could lead to positive transfer of training once delegates are back in the workplace. Although much research has been conducted on the transfer of training, scholars have indicated that there is still a long way to go to empirically determine how the transfer of knowledge and skills attained while attending a training programme takes place in the workplace (Blume, Ford, Baldwin and Huang 2010:104; Cheng & Ho 2001:102). Extant literature indicates that research in the field still focuses mainly on gaining participants' subjective perspectives and views as regards their attendance of such programmes (Sitzmann, Brown, Casper, Ely & Zimmerman 2008:280), but without understanding the actual transfer of training that takes place within the workplace. This is even more evident in the case of Leadership development programmes where there is not only scepticism about the effectiveness of leadership programmes (Kutschera & Byrd 2005:22) but also a perception of limited improvement in the workplace after attending such programmes (Powell & Yalcin 2010:228).

Therefore, the challenge still remains to find a comprehensive and much deeper understanding how employees that complete training programmes successfully apply their knowledge and skills to the advantage of the organisation (Dysvik & Kuvaas 2008:139;

Grossman & Salas 2011:105), especially in the case of leadership development programmes (Franke & Felfe 2012:138)

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to determine if delegates that successfully complete a structured leadership and management development intervention alter and/or implement their leadership and management practices based on the knowledge and skills acquired from such a programme.

3. STRUCTURED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

A structured leadership programme was introduced as part of a strategic drive to build and improve the leadership capacity of professional and administrative staff in the institution (Human Resources Development, Unisa [SA]). The main purpose of this initiative – referred to as the Building Tomorrow's Leaders (BTL) programme – was to expose a cohort of selected delegates to core and other most relevant leadership practices, methods and approaches through acquiring new knowledge and skills. The intended outcomes of the programme included:

- to foster trust by build credibility as a servant leader;
- to define a clear and compelling purpose as a leader;
- to be able to align and create systems of success that support the purpose and goals of the institution;
- to be able to unleash people's unique talents and potential to leverage performance expectations;
- understanding the way that encourages responsibility and growth for followers.

It was anticipated that, once delegates had successfully completed the programme by mastering the above-mentioned outcomes, they would be able to use the newly acquired knowledge and skills to either alter and/or change their existing leadership practices back in the workplace.

To understand any meaningful behavioural change in leadership it was decided to draw on the work of Posner and Kouzes. After 20 years of empirical research these scholars

identified a universal framework of five core practices that leaders should be able to perform. These practices include; leaders to challenge organisational processes towards continuous improvement; inspiring shared vision for individuals and teams; enabling\empowering followers to act; modelling the way for others; and influencing and encouraging followers positively (Posner & Kouzes 1993:192).

It was anticipated that the reinforcement of these practices by delegates would provide some indication that the programme's intended purpose had been served. In addition, previous research conducted on these leadership practices provides a positive association with certain outcome variables such as higher levels of follower commitment, motivation and job satisfaction (Posner & Kouzes 2010:191). These outcomes are regarded as important attributes obtained from such a training intervention.

Furthermore, a substantial amount of resources were dedicated to make this programme a success and to expose the selected cohort of delegates to the best possible leadership training to meet the intended and expected outcomes. It was established that forty-eight delegates had completed the programme successfully between 2012 and 2013. Delegates who attended the programme were nominated by their respective line managers. Nominations were based on each delegate's leadership potential and prior performance in the workplace.

The programme took place over a three-month period with the first two weeks consisting of classroom-based training, where after delegates were exposed to a workplace leadership team assignment. Thereafter, a final two weeks of classroom training was provided. This phased approach was intended to expose participants to some form of workplace learning after they had gained knowledge and acquired skills during the first phase of the programme. In addition, it was anticipated that line managers would also further expose delegates to on-going leadership development opportunities and practices.

4. APPLIED LEARNING THEORIES

The Building Tomorrow's Leaders programme was designed with the aim to enable participants to connect the knowledge and skills that they acquire during the programme to the real world, i.e. the workplace. Boud and Middleton (2003:194) are of the opinion that the workplace is the most conducive environment for learning and for practicing the new

knowledge and skills that better enable co-workers to participate in everyday, work-related activities.

4.1 Adult learning theories

Adult learning theorists provide meaningful insight into the link between the practicing of newly-acquired knowledge and skills and adult learning in the workplace (Knowles 1973:207; Kolb 1984:21). These theorists respectively coined the Andragogy learning theory and the Experiential learning theory, both of which emphasise the importance of experience in adult learning. For it is only when learners are able to apply their newly-acquired knowledge and skills practically that it can safely be said that learning has taken place. In 1984 Kolb defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984:38).

4.2 Facilitation of workplace learning

Ashton (2004:43) cites the following five conditions to enable the facilitation of workplace learning:

- access to and availability of relevant information;
- opportunities to learn and to apply learned skills;
- availability of support and feedback of managers and co-workers respectively;
- mentoring opportunities;
- virtual knowledge sharing.

Access and availability of information depends largely on trainers and facilitators to design, develop and facilitate online learning platforms for collective as well as virtual knowledge sharing. Participants should also receive relevant and practical learning tools (e.g. books, worksheets, and DVDs) to enable them to transfer their knowledge and skills in the most appropriate and effective way. Secondly, opportunities to learn should ideally be created and facilitated by delegates' line managers. In other instances, these opportunities occur either spontaneously or accidentally in the daily operations of the participant's interaction with others. Adult and experiential learning theories suggest that, if opportunities are not created for participants to apply their newly-acquired skills, these newly-acquired skills will soon be lost.

To stress the importance of the third condition, learners should also receive regular feedback from their line-managers or their peers on their performance, otherwise opportunities for learning will be stifled. Ashton (2004:45) emphasises that participants should also make a conscious effort to seek feedback and not necessarily wait for feedback to be given to them. This feedback can be sought through both formal and informal discussions.

Finally, the importance of providing mentoring opportunities to the participants after they have attended a training programme cannot be underestimated. According to Steinmann (2006:3), mentoring is the process “where a person with a serving and inspirational attitude (the mentor) firstly sees development potential in a still-to-be-developed person (the protégé).” This role is usually performed by line-managers, or a more senior/experienced person.

The transfer of training can be expedited when a person is being guided, monitored and advised by a more experienced expert/specialist in the field. This is due to the fact that a person will possibly make fewer mistakes or may learn faster when regular discussions with a mentor take place. The person is therefore set up for success instead of for failure. The transfer outcomes – which could include behaviour change, job-performance and transfer of training – could also be fast-tracked (Baldwin & Ford 1988:64).

Baldwin and Ford (1988:65) have also identified four key stages that participants should be exposed to in order to enable the transfer of learning in the workplace. These include:

- Pretraining motivation which refers to the intended effort on the part of the delegate towards mastering the content of a training programme.
- Learning which encompasses the process of mastering the content of a training programme.
- Training performance which measures how much a trainee has achieved in the training context.
- Transfer outcomes which refers to what participants attain when applying what they have acquired back on the job.

These attainments could include but are not limited to the following:

- behavior change, attitudes after training,

- transfer of training and job performance.

In determining the extent of the transfer of learning, one should firstly be cognisant of participants' active involvement in and transition through the abovementioned stages. Then, for meaningful and lasting learning to take place, participants in a learning programme should also be able – and enabled – to apply their learning practically in real life situations within a work context.

5. INDEPENDENT FACTORS AFFECTING TRAINING TRANSFER

Baldwin and Ford (1988:63) and Xiao (1996:55) define the transfer of training as the ability of adults to apply in the workplace the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they have learned from training experiences. The newly-acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes should also be maintained over a period of time in order to conclude that training has been transferred. Secondly, trainability is another important contributor for the transfer of training to take place. Noe and Schmitt (1986) define trainability as a function of ability, motivation and environmental favourability. These factors are considered to have a major impact on the transfer of training and the extent to which delegates are able to learn and apply the concepts which were emphasised during the Building Tomorrow's Leaders programme. Baldwin and Ford (1988:65) further group these factors as follows:

5.1 Ability (Individual factors)

Individual factors include personality and self-efficacy as the major characteristics which influence or play a role in the transfer of training. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (2012:19) as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances". Burke and Hutchins (2007:265) identified self-efficacy as one of seven core factors that is strongly associated with the transfer of learning. It can therefore be deduced that participants who believe strongly that their performance and behaviour will improve upon completion of the course are more likely to apply the skills and knowledge which they have acquired from the training back in the workplace.

5.2 Motivational factors

Participants who are not adequately motivated to participate in a particular training programme will not be effective in mastering the training content and this will affect their

training performance. These motivational factors include career and job attitudes (referring to the cognitive state and how one identifies psychologically with one's job and career), organisational commitment and reaction to training interventions, as well as post training interventions (Burke & Hutchins 2007:282).

Noe and Schmitt (1986:502) believe that trainees who often engage in cognitive and environmental search activities normally have a better understanding of their strengths, weaknesses and interests, and also recognise the importance of learning new skills. London (1993:56) concurs, stating that a person who possesses knowledge of himself or herself in relation to his or her career (also referred to as career insight) also appreciates the relevance of learning and development opportunities. Career insight therefore correlates with interest and participation in training and development interventions (Todd & Tarulli 1994:29).

Intrinsically motivated employees are generally more self-driven and more autonomy-oriented (Ryan & Deci 2000:55) and they will usually take more responsibility to ensure that they possess the required levels of skills and abilities (Thomas 2002:39). This practice is also referred to by Knowles (1973:207) as self-directed learning.

5.3 Environmental factors

In order for training or learning to be transferred, it is important that the environment in which participants will operate in post training is favourable and enabling. Facticeau, Dobbins, Russell, Ladd & Kudisch (1995:3) and Tracey, Tannenbaum and Kavanagh (1995:52) emphasise major factors in support of transfer of learning – such as social support from subordinates, peers, supervisors and top management.

Furthermore the application and transfer of learning is largely dependent on conducive conditions created for participants in the workplace. Baumgartel, Howard, Reynolds and Pathan (1984:2), Rouiller and Goldstein (1993:378) and Saks and Burke (2012:119) reiterate this viewpoint by emphasising that practitioners should be cognisant of the fact that participants utilise training more effectively in a supportive or favourable working environment where delegates can have an opportunity to practice newly acquired skills and give and get feedback on assignments (MacRae & Skinner 2011:984).

Support by line-managers, peers and colleagues through mentorship, virtual knowledge sharing and providing access to relevant information and resources cannot be

underestimated in the transfer of knowledge and learning. Independent factors such as an individual's ability and motivation to learn and to apply learning, together with environmental conditions, also play a critical role in this process (MacRae & Skinner 2011:984).

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews was conducted. Based on the data obtained from the interviews, inductive thematic analysis was used for this analysis.

6.1 Sample

The research was carried out at a large comprehensive South African university. The individuals who participated in the BTL Programme were the focus for this study. An appropriate and relevant sample group was selected from the 48 learners who participated in the 2012 and 2013 Building Tomorrow's Leaders programmes.

The final sample for this study consisted of 13 participants. Six participants were sampled from the 2012 BTL group and seven participants from the 2013 group. Respondents were purposefully sampled by acquiring a list of delegates from the facilitators of the BTL programme who, in their expert opinion, had demonstrated the most development during the programme. Other aspects that were considered in terms of demographic representivity included functionality, discipline, race and gender. The rationale behind this method of sampling was that the targeted individuals could provide a better account of their development and applied learning across the work spectrum.

6.2 Narrative enquiry

A narrative enquiry technique was applied for purposes of this research. The decision was based on the realisation that leaders understand and could describe their own personal leadership journeys and experiences best, through a process of storytelling (George, Mclean & Craig 2011:12).

Narrative enquiry is also best suited to add meaning of an event or events and to organise the sequence of these events to determine and understand the significance of each event/s through its/their relation to the whole (Elliott 2005:17).

6.3 Data collection

Three semi-structured questions were formulated and used as a guide for delegates to write their stories. The questions were intended to gain meaningful insight into the delegates' development journey in participating in the BTL programme and their experiences in applying their knowledge and skills back in their work environment. An extract from the questionnaire is provided hereunder:

“Using the photo provided to you please reflect on your feelings, emotions and experiences DURING and AFTER the BTL Programme. In YOUR story capture those moments and trigger events where, (1) you talk about YOUR personal development journey. (2) You were able to change or implement some of the leadership and management practices in your work environment based on the knowledge and skills you acquired during the BTL Programme and (3) tell us how the BTL programme helped shape/change your career development”.

In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the qualitative data, the interview schedule was pilot tested and assessed by two individual experts in the field.

6.4 Data analysis

Eight narratives were received from participants. Data from the narratives were selected and grouped together based on four main categories that emerged. These categories included application of leadership through self-directed leadership, the transfer of leadership actions and behaviours in the workplace, environmental factors facilitating or inhibiting the transfer of learning and, finally, further development opportunities.

Data was first individually analysed by three independent researchers, all specialising in the field of leadership training and development. Only upon completion of individual analyses did the researchers compare their codes and suggested themes with each other. After several iterations of comparing codes and themes and returning to the literature, further recoding and renaming of themes produced a final list of subthemes and themes (Leedy & Ormrod 2012:147).

Tesch's method of open coding was used for this analysis (Creswell 2009:86). Themes, which included recurrence, forcefulness and repetition of words, phrases, sentences and statements, were identified, guided by Owen's criteria for thematic analysis (Owen

1984:280). An interaction of the final analysis of first-order codes, sub-themes and themes is indicated in figure 1 below. The more detailed analysis of codes and themes is attached.

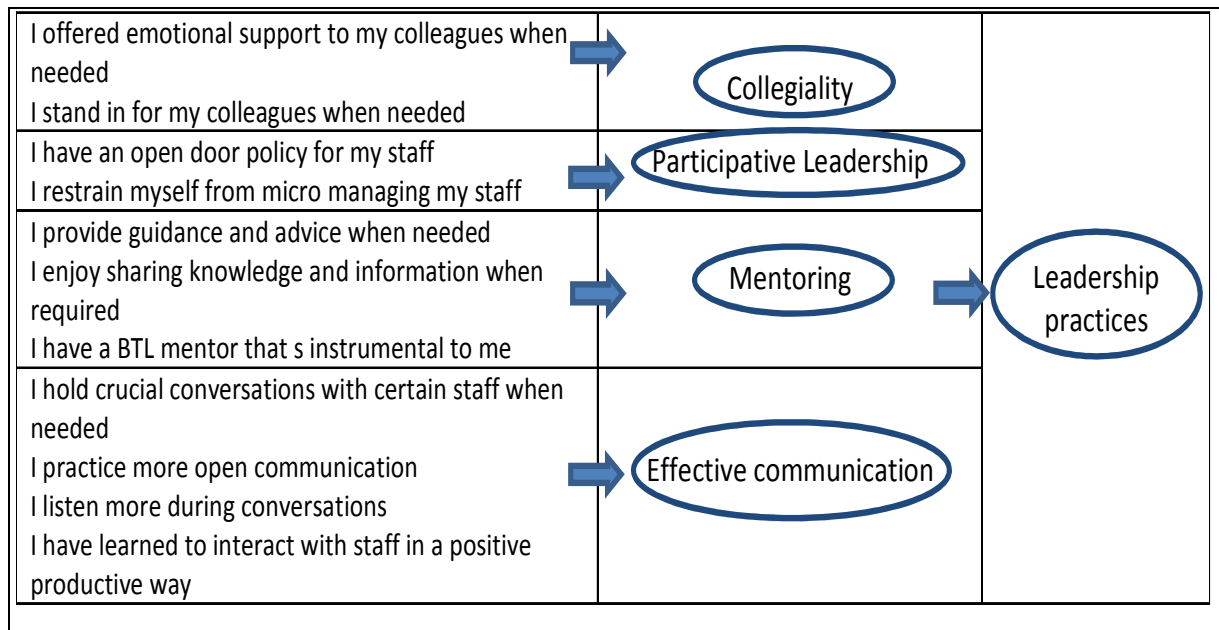


FIGURE 1: Screenshot of transcription with first-order codes and themes

Source: Analysis of transcription results

7. RESULTS

The findings are presented under four main categories that may have an impact on the application of leadership practices in the workplace:

7.1 Self-directed leadership

The analysis of the narratives revealed that respondents had a need to understand and become more aware of themselves in order to become better leaders. The following statement supports this notion:

“During the BTL Programme we went through an exercise of self-discovery and that helps me daily to do self-introspection in order to improve in my leadership journey.”

Sub themes of self-directed leadership that were identified include: collaborative learning, self-motivation, mindfulness, a serving mind-set, self-development and being a team player.

One of the statements in support of gaining more insight into becoming a better team player is as follows:

“Leading a team requires a lot of time, effort, individual attention to team members, and flexibility from the team leader.”

This self-insight is embedded in a servant leadership mindset which is expressed in the following statement.

“I see my role at the University beyond just the departmental activities.”

7.2 Transfer of leadership actions and behaviours back in the workplace

The respondents emphasised numerous actions and behaviours that had been applied back in the workplace since they had attended the programme. The actions and behaviours culminated in specific demonstrated leadership practices. These include demonstrating a positive influence over others, having the ability to envisage personal and work goals and to align this ability with the larger institution, building trust with colleagues and staff, capacitating others through relevant delegation and providing development options, building interpersonal relationships, valuing collegiality, practicing participative leadership and mentoring and lastly enabling effective communication. Although respondents indicated that they were either implementing or participating in these practices, they saw this as a continuous development process that has many challenges.

This is emphasised by the following statements:

“Holding crucial conversations has not been easy but I have tried to work on that”

“I have learned how to have an uncomfortable conversation in a professional way”

7.3 Environmental factors

Upon analysing the narratives of the respondents, environmental influences emerged as one of the themes which had impacted on them in applying the newly-gained knowledge and skills back in the workplace. From this theme, the following sub-themes were identified: a stagnant environment, disempowerment, cultural consciousness, setting boundaries and managing expectations. Great insights had been gained by respondents and they had become much more aware of how the environment influences or impacts on their ability to demonstrate appropriate leadership actions and behaviours.

The following statements are offered in support hereof:

“I have learnt to be aware of my surroundings”

“I quickly learnt that the environment was not ready for my fresh and innovative thinking”

“I have become more conscious of the various cultures that I encounter”

7.4 Further development opportunities

Evidence from the narratives suggests that participants had been exposed to – and had received – numerous formal and informal leadership development opportunities since attending this leadership programme. Some of these development opportunities included:

- appointment of an acting manager;
- appointment as executive member of a forum;
- assisting the executive director with special tasks and assignments;
- exposure to executive management meetings;
- furthering formal qualifications;
- attending courses and programmes;
- promotion to next managerial position;
- attendance of national and international conferences;
- exposure and involvement on institutional projects;
- appointed as mentor;
- serving on high level working committees.

The range of development opportunities mentioned by participants spans the spectrum of possible further development. Participants reported on both formal and informal development opportunities. In most cases, these development opportunities had been initiated by participants' direct line managers and, in other instances, exposure and development opportunities had been driven from executive level in the institution. Although the intention of providing these development opportunities was not specifically mentioned and clarified, there is an indication that participants viewed these initiatives as part of furthering their career development and leadership journey.

8. FINDINGS

This study offers seven main findings that either facilitate or hinder the transfer of leadership practices back in the workplace:

- Adult learning theorists are of the opinion that experience – the practical application of learning – is the single most important contributing factor in ensuring that learning takes place, or that there is a continuation of learning (Knowles 1973:207). Learners need to be granted the opportunity to apply practically the knowledge and skills that they have learnt. If these opportunities are not provided, then learning may be lost. The application of new knowledge and skills acquired, and the consequent altering of long-term behavioural change, is largely dependent on four main support factors, namely a conducive work environment, opportunities to practise new skills and behaviour, additional support mechanisms to aid learning and development, and the ability and capacity of the learner to apply the knowledge and skills gained.
- Environmental consequences such as a stagnant working environment, lack of empowerment, and the management of participants learning expectations that impede further learning can be ascribed to two main factors, namely line managers' involvement or lack of support and, secondly, the existing and predominant culture and climate of the institution (Chiaburu, Van Dam & Hutchins 2010:187).
- Although formal appointment and positioning for possible development was initiated by line managers, minimal evidence suggests that line managers are actively involved and engaged in this process of formal/informal and structured/unstructured initiatives such as mentoring, workplace learning, career guidance, and regular progress and feedback sessions. Thus, the initial excitement and desire of delegates to implement these newly-acquired leadership practices upon successfully completing a prestigious leadership programme is met with a distinct realisation of the limited managerial support that delegates receive to implement these practices back in the workplace.
- In addition, the institutions' restrictive and diverse cultures with reference to known work practices, existing policies and diverse composition of the workforce do not necessarily encourage and support the application of these practices. These restrictions have been known to prevent and demotivate learners from transferring learning gained from attending developmental programmes (Baumgartel *et al.* 1984:2). Franke and Felfe (2012:143) points out that these restrictions not only impact negatively on the learner but also affects their followers overall performance. According to these authors the implication of the cost of these restrictions might be twofolded, namely cost of the

training and the cost due to “old” less effective leadership behaviour patterns. Although formal learning opportunities were limited, it is evident that some participants consciously decided to make use of informal peer collaboration to further their learning. This also coincided with an attempt to apply the knowledge and skills gained in an informal capacity with family, friends and communities. These actions supported a belief that the influence and impact that can be achieved is wider than only in the immediate work environment.

- Aside from these restrictive environmental conditions it is evident that individuals are still motivated to apply and transfer newly-learned leadership actions and behaviours. Further results suggest that this notion emanated from a strong internal drive and persuasion to adapt and alter existing leadership beliefs and paradigms through self-directed leadership efforts. One explanation for this strong internal drive could be ascribed to the collaborative environment that participants experienced during the leadership programme whilst relating to efforts of others in an attempt to change their environments.
- Intrinsic motivational factors and personal ability to learn constituted a major shift to a renewed awareness of internal reflection, self-insight, self-motivation and a responsibility for self-development. This internal realisation and awareness is not just a major contributing factor towards self-efficacy (Bandura 2012:19), but is also an important building block in the development process of leaders. In addition, it is evident that participants also stressed the importance of having a servant leadership mind-set, which was one of the main outcomes of this leadership programme.
- The results also suggest that the application of leadership stretches beyond self-orientated leadership only. Further evidence suggests that participants applied a range of core leadership practices, as identified by Posner and Kouzes (1993:192) which supports the leadership agenda of the institution. These practices are also associated with a much more transformational leadership approach (Avolio & Yammarino 2013:65). It is evident that leaders are applying newly acquired knowledge and skills by an indication that they are prepared to challenge the existing leadership status quo in their respective work environments. It is also noticeable that, in many instances, the

application of these practices is self-initiated and lies only within the immediate sphere of the respondent's own influence, that is, his or her colleagues and peers.

9. IMPLICATIONS

It is suggested that line managers and participants need to enter into a formal contract when selecting/nominating participants for such a development programme. Such a contract would specify exactly what the delegate would be doing upon returning from the programme. This should include opportunities in which the participant would be able to apply the newly gained knowledge and skills, thereby ensuring a continuation of learning, as well as preventing the loss of such knowledge and skills. It is also important that this contract be reviewed regularly to determine whether or not originally-agreed outcomes have been met. This is also to determine whether any further developmental gaps exist and should be addressed. In addition, these opportunities should also be included in the developmental plans of individuals.

Line managers of nominees for leadership development programmes should ensure that the working environments in which the learners find themselves after attending such leadership programmes are more conducive for the practical application of newly-acquired knowledge and skills. Conducive environments would include elements such as peer collaboration and supervisory support. Linking participants to dedicated mentors or coaches may also create a more favourable environment for the transfer of learning.

Although the research was designed to provide an understanding of applied learning in the workplace, future research should, ideally, attempt to gain more specific insight into applied leadership practices and the impact thereof on the leadership culture within the institution. Future research should also attempt to prioritise the most important environmental conditions that will enhance the transfer of training.

10. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that most of the participants who successfully completed a structured leadership and management development intervention did indeed apply a wide range of essential leadership practices based on the knowledge and skills gained.

Although participants are enthusiastic and willing to apply their newly-learned knowledge and skills through applied practices, their efforts are not always supported by their immediate

line managers, while certain essential environmental factors also hamper and restrict this transfer.

This study also provides meaningful insight for practitioners to manage the transfer of training process from learning to application. In addition, the practical application of the transfer of knowledge and skills as highlighted in this study can contribute towards mitigating the impeding and restrictive factors that learners experience upon returning to the workplace. Finally, the large amount of financial resources utilised for this type of leadership development intervention can be justified only if the vast range of applied leadership practices found in the study are sustained through supportive organisational efforts.

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