

Outdoor experiential training as a medium for the development of today's leaders

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Outdoor experiential training is often used for the enhancement of generalised workplace skills including those considered relevant for effective leadership. Traditionally, facilitation processes and strategies employed in outdoor experiential training have often relied on theories delivered as part of an outdoor leadership training program. This was premised on the assumption that skills and capabilities developed in such programs transfer to the mainstream business market. In this paper we present data from an International study on the characteristics of outdoor education professionals that adds further insights into the role that outdoor experiential training plays in the development of generic leadership characteristics. Outdoor leaders were found to characterise transformational leadership qualities and considered that the development of these qualities were directly linked to their outdoor experiential training.

Keywords: outdoor experiential training, leadership development, generic leadership characteristics, transformational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Outdoor experiential training has become a popular medium for the development of a series of work-related competencies considered essential for organizational effectiveness. In the United States alone organizations are investing a phenomenal amount of time and money on programs designed to develop leadership skills, team work skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills and trust (Williams, Graham, & Baker, 2003). The popularity of these programs stems from their experiential nature and according to Williams et al. (2003) "businesses are spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on outdoor experiential training" (p. 45). Many would argue that outdoor experiential training programs have the advantage of placing participants in a learning context whereby the learner is required to engage in direct experience in order to increase skills (Priest & Gass, 1997, 2005; Williams, et al., 2003).

The benefits of outdoor experiential leadership development programs are somewhat ubiquitous and hard to define or measure (Meyer, 2003; Williams, et al., 2003). This in part can be attributed to the fact that the training relies on the implicit and intuitive knowledge of the trainer. In an outdoor experiential training context the trainer has often developed their knowledge and expertise through outdoor leadership programs (Smith & Penny, 2010). That is, the trainer's knowledge of leadership theory and practice most often stems from theories and concepts delivered as part of their outdoor leadership development and not necessarily through an organizational leadership lens. Conger (1993) recognized a problem with this approach, suggesting that leadership models in organizational studies have developed rapidly since 1985 while outdoor training models of leadership development may still be basing program design on old-fashioned theoretical presumptions. For this reason it is important to determine whether outdoor leadership training still has a place in the development of tomorrow's leaders. In this paper we argue that outdoor leadership training might have a very

important part to play in the development of essential leadership skills. The authors present data from a set of pilot studies that suggests that outdoor leaders (i.e. those people who lead groups in an outdoor setting) possess attributes aligned with contemporary leadership theories and argue that, if undertaken effectively, outdoor leadership training can add value to an organization's leadership development process.

OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP THEORY AND PRACTICE

Research and practice in outdoor leadership is often centred around studies undertaken in the 1980s (Priest & Gass, 1997). However, leadership research in other fields advanced with a different perspective (Bass, 1985). According to Brymer and Gray (2006) leadership research and theory in outdoor education has focused on the situational model of leadership. Often the focus was on understanding leadership characteristics from a contextually specific and skill-based background. Leaders were considered to be experts with a specific knowledge set and skills that influence the goal direction of followers. From this perspective it would seem that outdoor leadership training provided the background to the development of skills that were specific to the outdoor context.

More recently, Brymer and colleagues (Brymer, Gray, Cotton & Carpenter, 2010a, 2010b; Brymer & Gray, 2006) introduced the transformational-transactional model as appropriate for understanding outdoor leadership and aligning outdoor leadership with more current organisational leadership theories. Brymer et al. (2010a) found that even though outdoor leaders were not introduced to the transformational leadership model they demonstrated "a higher level of transformational leadership qualities than the general population" (p. 102). They also found that participants "had positive attitudes, beliefs and emotional connections to the natural world" (p. 102). These findings prompted Brymer and others (Brymer et al., 2010b) to recommend that outdoor leadership training should be investigated as a medium for the development of generic transformational leadership skills. In this paper we show that not only do outdoor leaders have high levels of transformational leadership qualities but these qualities are often developed as a direct result of an individual's outdoor leadership training. Based on this premise, we argue that outdoor leaders have particular leadership qualities that are desired by business. Our hope is that this model might eventually add further insights into leadership and introduce the concept that outdoor leadership training is a valuable asset to enhance the development of generic leadership qualities.

Transactional-transformational leadership

For over two decades, the transactional-transformational leadership model has featured in leadership theory and practice (Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Bycio, Hackett & Allen, 1995; J.J. Sosik, Avolio & Kahai, 1997). The terms were coined by the seminal work of Burns (1978) and further clarified by Bass (1985). Both transactional and transformational leadership can be effective in their own right (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Exceptional leaders are likely to employ both methodologies at varying times (Robbins, Millet, Cacioppe & Waters-Marsh, 1988). To this end, Cerni, Curtis and Colmar (2008) state that "transformational leadership augments the effectiveness of transactional leadership; it does not replace transactional leadership" (p. 62).

Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership is the traditional form of leadership (Hsu, Bell & Cheng, 2002) which encompasses the leader-follower relationship. It is based on a "transaction" or interchange of information between followers and their leaders (Howell & Avolio, 1993). According to Brymer and Gray (2006), there are generally two key factors ascribed to transactional leadership.

Firstly, *contingent reward leadership* is both an active and positive interchange between the leader and follower. Upon successfully completing previously agreed goals or objectives (Bycio, et al., 1995) followers are rewarded or recognized for their efforts. In some instances, followers may receive bonuses, merits or recognition. Contingent reward leadership is self-limiting, as followers only achieve the negotiated level of performance (Kraaft, Engelbrecht & Theron, 2004). The reward provided is reliant on the satisfactory completion of the task (Howell & Avolio, 1993). While the leader and follower are agreeable with the pre-arranged relationship, the status quo will continue, performance will suffice and rewards will be consistent. Cerni et al. (2008) and Klimoski and Hayes (1980) have found that under certain circumstances in the workplace this type of leadership can enhance performance and heighten employee satisfaction.

Secondly, transactional leaders primarily approach followers when mishaps, mistakes or problems become evident. In this way, they avoid intervention until something has gone awry, amiss or wrong. Transactional leadership in this format is termed *management-by-exception* and can be either passive or active. In the active

management-by-exception form, leadership hinges around the continual monitoring of followers' performance, with the anticipation of monitoring mistakes before they become a serious problem. At the outset the leader clarifies standards, expectations and criteria for assessment and benchmarking. Corrective action can be more immediate as the leader is continually measuring performance against expectations in an attempt to determine deviations.

In passive *management-by-exception* the leader awaits until the culmination of the task before assessing or determining whether a problem exists. Expectations and standards are only made apparent once a mistake has manifested. As a natural corollary, intervention is taken only after the problem has been identified or the mistake made (Howell & Avolio, 1993). This form of leadership has demonstrated negative impacts on satisfaction and performance (Howell & Avolio, 1993).

According to Gerstner and Day (1997) transactional leaders are principally motivated to satisfy their own self-interests. Along the same train of thought, Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans and May (2005) have argued that leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviors. This has far-reaching implications for outdoor education leadership and leaders in general, as it suggests that transactional leaders direct, manipulate or fabricate their approach to influence participants in order to complete tasks that meet the leader's agenda even if the agenda might not be favourable for the follower.

Transformational leadership

The type of leadership that has in the past been labelled charismatic or inspirational (Howell & Avolio, 1993) and goes beyond the concept of performance for reward is now termed transformational leadership. Increased motivation and job satisfaction are evident under a transformational leader (Cerni et al., 2008). For Howell and Avolio (1993) transformational leadership develops "thinking" (*intellectual stimulation*), supports individuals (*individualised consideration*) and provides inspiration, faith and respect (*charismatic leadership*) (Barling et al., 1996).

The elements of *intellectual stimulation* allow the leader to inspire followers to develop curiosity, problem-solving and creative thinking (Hsu et al., 2002). *Individualised consideration* encompasses both developmental orientations and individual orientations. When the leader assigns tasks that enhance motivation, innate abilities and potential, it is classified as *developmental orientation*. Alternatively, *individual orientation* includes personal relationships, mutual understandings, familiarity and two-way communications. Hsu et al. (2002) advocate that *charismatic leadership* be divided into two distinct elements. The first, *inspirational leadership* is the ability to inspire and encourage a greater emotional attachment to the leader and the leader's vision. The second, *idealized influence* is the behavioural aspect of charisma and obtains the whole-hearted commitment from followers.

Developing a vision for the future and focus on longer term goals is a hallmark of transformational leadership (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1997). Such leaders are comfortable pursuing risk and challenging the status quo and demonstrate high internal locus of control (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Systems are seen as flexible and dynamic to meet the requirements of the vision and goals. Transformational leaders stimulate followers and encourage them "to transcend their own self-interests for a higher collective purpose, mission, or vision" (Howell & Avolio, 1993, p. 891). They focus on facilitating self-development and growth (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Peterson, 1996). Motivation for this type of leadership is based on "higher order values and beliefs" (Gerstner & Day, 1997, p. 838). Maude (1997) espoused that becoming an effective leader was synonymous with becoming oneself.

Transformational leaders enhance commitment (Barling et al., 1996), develop acceptance of responsibility and increase followers' effort (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Invariably, performance eclipses the expected or negotiated levels. Howell and Avolio (1993) found that this is inextricably linked to the level of commitment, intrinsic motivation, personal development and sense of purpose demonstrated by a leader.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken in two stages. In 2009, the first stage of the research was conducted to investigate the characteristics of outdoor leaders with respect to the transactional-transformational leadership model. The second stage of the research was administered in 2010 and was designed to determine how leadership characteristics were developed.

Participants

Participants in the first stage of the study were 177 outdoor leaders from 13 countries. Participants volunteered for the study, identifying themselves as an outdoor leader, by responding to an email informing them of the study outline and requirements. Participants in the second stage (n=131) were those who identified that they were willing to be part of a follow-on study.

Instruments

In the first study participants were invited to complete the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, leader form (MLQ) (Avolio & Bass, 1995). The MLQ was developed as a means to measure the nine leadership components identified in the transactional-transformational leadership model and has become the most reliable research tool for measuring transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2002; Bass & Avolio, 2004). The MLQ is based on a scale from 0-4 (Not at all, Once in a while, Sometimes, Fairly often, Frequently if not always). Scores from 2-4 inclusive would indicate a positive response. A basic descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret data. Participants from this initial study who expressed an interest in being part of a follow on research project were sent a short survey requesting clarification on perceptions about how leadership characteristics were gained. This second survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions. The qualitative answers were analysed for recurring and emergent themes.

Procedure

In the first stage of the research project, an email was sent to five online networks (the society of park & recreation educators, the outdoor and adventure education research network, the Google outdoor leadership network and the sustainability and environmental education network) asking for volunteers who identified themselves as an outdoor leader to undertake an online survey. The email contained a non-identifiable link to the online survey. The survey was completed anonymously and online. Respondents were also asked for demographic information and to provide an email account if they wished to be contacted again for a follow-up study. In the second stage those participants who expressed a desire to be contacted again were sent the follow-up email to a smaller online survey which asked for more information about the development and evolution of their leadership style(s).

RESULTS

In the initial study, 177 surveys (male n= 115, female n= 62) were completed, with 37 questionnaires started but not completed (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics about the participants

Total Participants		177	
Gender	Male	115	64.9%
	Females	62	35.1%
Average Age		41.0 (11.7)	

Transformational leadership

Results from the MLQ show that outdoor leaders score highly in the transformational characteristics and contingent reward and lower in the management by exception and laissez-faire characteristics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Detailed results Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) – Leader form

Category	Combined Mean (SD)
<i>Idealized Influence (Attributed)</i>	2.91 (0.95)
<i>Idealized Influence (Behaviour)</i>	3.09 (0.87)
<i>Inspirational Motivation</i>	3.17 (0.78)
<i>Intellectual Stimulation</i>	3.07 (0.80)
<i>Individualized Consideration</i>	3.45 (0.69)
<i>Contingent Reward</i>	2.96 (0.96)
<i>Management-by-Exception (Active)</i>	1.89 (1.11)
<i>Management-by-Exception (Passive)</i>	1.10 (1.00)
<i>Laissez-faire Leadership</i>	0.79 (0.83)

Results from the MLQ were compared with the general population (B. Bass & Avolio, 2004). A basic descriptive evaluation of the results from outdoor leaders in this study demonstrated a significantly higher level of transformational leadership qualities than the general population in all cases except the idealized influence. Results also indicated a higher level of transactional leadership qualities though only the management-by-exception results were significant (see Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) Results

Leadership Style	Brymer et al. MLQ Scale Scores <i>Mean & (SD)</i>	Bass & Avolio Norm (2004) (n=27285) <i>Mean</i>	Mean Diff.
<i>Transformational Leadership</i>			
Idealized Influence (Attributed)	2.91 (0.95)	2.94	-0.03
Idealized Influence (Behaviour)	3.09 (0.87)	2.77	0.32**
Inspirational Motivation	3.17 (0.78)	2.92	0.25**
Intellectual Stimulation	3.07 (0.80)	2.78	0.29**
Individualized Consideration	3.45 (0.69)	2.85	0.60**
<i>Transactional Leadership</i>			
Contingent Reward	2.96 (0.96)	2.87	0.09
Management-by-Exception (Active)	1.89 (1.11)	1.67	0.22**
Management-by-Exception (Passive)	1.10 (1.00)	1.03	0.07
<i>Nontransactional Leadership</i>			
Laissez-faire Leadership	0.79 (0.83)	0.65	0.14

(** Highly significant >0.01, *significant. 0.05)

In the follow-up study, the 131 original participants who agreed to be contacted again were sent a short survey requesting clarification on how they perceived that they developed their personal leadership qualities. From this second survey, 45 people replied (response rate = 35%). Participants were asked to consider whether their leadership style was influenced by outdoor leadership training. Those who considered that their leadership style was directly influenced by their training were asked a follow-on qualitative question in order to ascertain the major influences on their leadership style. Results from this second survey revealed a strong tendency to perceive that leadership skills were natural to the individual (n= 36, 95%) and that in some way outdoor leadership training (both formal and informal) played a role in the development of their leadership qualities and behaviours (n=31, 82%). For example, one participant expressed the view that their leadership training program was essential for the development of appropriate leadership qualities and the skills to support others:

My outdoor leadership training really helped develop my interest in leadership as the development of others and provided the skills to empower others to make decisions right for them (Participant A, April 2011).

However, this assertion was tempered with the realisation that opportunities for formal learning needed to be supported by actual experience: "I have taken on board a great deal that I have picked up in leadership training. I have learnt also through dealing with people and the application of life skills" (Participant B, April 2011).

A thematic analysis of the qualitative themes revealed three recurring key issues: 1) the role of the leadership training program facilitator; 2) knowledge of and understanding leadership theory; and 3) observation of others. The three key themes will be articulated in further detail.

The role of the leadership training program facilitator

This was the most highly represented of the three major themes and refers to the importance of the trainer in leadership training programs. The person delivering the training had a considerable influence on the participants' future leadership style as the participants observed their teachers, often mirroring their role models. The styles exhibited by the leadership trainers influenced the leadership style taken up by the trainee. For example, one participant noted, "The biggest impact perhaps comes from the people that deliver the training to you, their personalities, behaviours and actions" (Participant C, April 2011).

A second participant spoke about the balance between the material delivered and the style and behaviours of those delivering the material. For this participant the material being delivered seemed to take second place to observing and learning from the facilitator:

The number one factor that has influenced my leadership style was having the opportunity to be mentored by gurus in the field. Any time I was at a course or training I would have one eye on the content and the other on how the leader facilitated the group (Participant D, April 2011).

Knowledge of and understanding leadership theory

Participants also considered that an understanding of leadership theory as obtained from formal courses helped form their own leadership style. For example, one participant noted that their current PhD program was influential: "I am in a PhD program in education and I think a good deal of my current leadership style is a function of that course work..." (Participant E, April 2011). The perception that the leadership course actually provided the theoretical background to leadership was also reiterated by others who considered that an understanding of the theory enabled them to "unlock" what leaders in the field were doing: "The theory aspects of how and why outdoor leadership works helped me to unpack what other leaders were doing in the field once I was working there" (Participant F, April 2011).

Observation of others

As well as observation and learning from those leading the outdoor leadership programs participants also considered that they learnt from observing established leaders post leadership training courses. For example, one participant noted "continued observation and collaboration with experienced leaders post training" (Participant G, April 2011). However, observation also related to a continual process whereby participants gained knowledge beyond their training: "I believe my leadership style has developed over my number of years of experience, some training, but lots of observation, listening, trial and error, and being humble" (Participant H, April 2011).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this current study provide a general overview of transformational leadership qualities and attitudes, beliefs and also a comparison with the general population. Data obtained from the outdoor leaders suggest that they have a higher transformational leadership style than International leadership norms as measured by the MLQ. All categories except for the idealized influence (attributed) seemed to be significantly higher. Whilst the score for the idealized influence (attributed) scale was slightly lower the results are similar to the normative sample. Results from the contingency reward and management by exception are also higher. However, only the management by exception (active) seems to be significantly higher than the population norm. The outdoor leader sample was also slightly above the normative sample for the laissez faire category.

Data from this study suggest that outdoor leaders are concerned about individuals and wish to support individual growth but are also comfortable ensuring that followers are effectively managed. The management by exception results could be explained by the fact that outdoor leaders spend a considerable amount of time managing risks and ensuring that activities are planned in advance in order to minimise the chances of disasters. Outdoor leaders demonstrated responses that were similar to the norms for contingent reward, management by exception and laissez-faire concepts. This would indicate that leaders in the field are more comfortable supporting the growth of the people they lead and less interested in providing rewards, watching for mistakes or taking a back seat. When comparing to the general population it would seem that outdoor leaders in this study demonstrated slightly greater transformational leadership qualities in all areas except the idealized influence (attributed). It follows as a natural corollary that outdoor leaders do demonstrate qualities that are accounted for under the transformational-transactional leadership model.

The second-phase follow-on study revealed that participants considered that they developed their leadership characteristics and behaviours through their outdoor leadership training courses. For some, the theoretical perspectives were important. However, in the most part the learning seemed to involve opportunities to observe and learn from the experienced leaders undertaking the training program. Outdoor leadership training does present an opportunity to develop applied leadership skills. Further, these opportunities also seem to develop transformational leadership skills.

The findings in this study indicate that individuals undertaking a training program to develop skills as an outdoor leader learn skills that correlate highly with those identified in the transformational-transactional leadership model. This finding is particularly interesting as individuals seem to develop transformational leadership qualities even though the transformational leadership model is generally not explicitly taught. The indications here are that outdoor leadership training has the potential to facilitate transformational leadership skills in business leaders. In addition, related research indicates that outdoor leaders are highly ecologically minded (E Brymer, et al., 2010a) which is also considered a vital element of leadership development and business effectiveness (J. J Sosik & Jung, 2010). Thus outdoor experiential training programs might also provide the extra benefit of a more ecologically relevant training environment.

LIMITATIONS

This paper has outlined the preliminary findings of a broader investigation into the characteristics of outdoor leaders and how they developed their leadership style. One limitation of this study is that all participants were self-selected and the results were self-reported measures. What is required is an empirical set of studies to explore outdoor experiential leadership training as an intervention to investigate whether outdoor experiential training can explicitly bring about transformational leadership qualities for generic business leaders.

SUMMARY

Research focusing on leadership indicates that transformational leadership is strongly linked to effectiveness as measured by social and organizational factors. The preliminary findings from this project convey that outdoor leaders demonstrate transformational qualities beyond those expected from measurements of leadership norms. This would indicate that outdoor leaders might have qualities that would benefit organizations as a whole. At the same time, outdoor leaders perceive that they have developed these skills through formal and informal training programs. The indications of these findings are that outdoor experiential learning programs have the potential to develop transformational leadership skills in business leaders.

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