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Designed to Lead?

Advancing Evidence-Based Design of Transformative Leadership Journeys

By Michael D. Fischer and Andrew White

Critical self-analysis and reflection is essential to effective leadership. Yet do we apply this to executive leadership programs seeking to develop leaders? Yes we hand out evaluation sheets, but are such well-worn tools really enough to understand how program design affects actual leadership development? As Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer asks in his recent critique of the 'leadership industry', given the estimated US$45 billion spent on leadership development globally each year, how much of this is actually based on rigorous research evidence of what works and why?

These were among key questions driving our two-year study examining the 'backstage' elements of Saïd Business School's 'flagship' executive leadership programs at the University of Oxford – the *Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme and High Performance Leadership*.

These two prestigious programs bring in global leaders across different sectors, offering opportunities to study how leaders experience and learn from two very different pedagogical models. The *Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme* has run for over 30 years with its design evolving over time, based on a blending of contemporary leadership thinking with Oxford's strong tradition of developing leaders over 800 years. With its emphasis on stimulating transformative leadership experiences, it draws strongly on Oxford's tutorial system, linking insights with participants' personal leadership challenges in their own contexts. *The High Performance Leadership,* meanwhile, has a tighter curriculum focused in a more planned, scientific management approach that is designed to create high performing teams. What could we learn from analyzing these two global leaders in executive education?

For two years we drilled into every aspect of these programs, gleaning insight into how programs were experienced by participants, how it resonated, and ultimately what impact it had on their leadership practice. We conducted 200 interviews with business leaders from across the world who participated in these programs – before, during, and up to 1 year afterwards – as well as faculty who designed and taught the two programs. Alongside this, we conducted 500 hours of first-hand ethnographic observation, participating in the programs alongside participants, and supported this by analyzing over 6 years of archived data, documents, applications and evaluations. Our results showed that certain features in executive education programs, often overlooked, are critical for effective leadership development.

Elements that both challenge and open up personal stories and accounts are extraordinarily important

Crafting 'formative spaces'

"All politics is local" opined Tip O'Neil in the 1930's, and executive education is no different. Program content needs to be tailored to and carefully embedded in participants' personal, organizational contexts. Their personal histories, contexts and motives for attending programs certainly play a dominant role in how they engage, and influence what issues they may present and wish to work on. Yet the often personal aspects of this material are like parts of an sensitive ecosystem that can very quickly be submerged, drowned out by content-heavy curriculum design, including by dominant notions of leadership. As one participant emphasized, the more personalized 'formative spaces' of tutorial groups can be a rare opportunity for leaders to honestly reflect upon and speak to each other's lives.

Indeed, a key challenge is to bring to the fore quieter voices and a wider range of experiences and perspectives – including those of senior executives who may initially present dominant external portrayals of themselves, crafted through prior experience. So elements that both challenge and open up personal stories and accounts are extraordinarily important, especially as this can be one of the elements that participants value most, even if their personal reflections and emotions are uncovered only hesitantly.

Our findings indicate that these aspects are not a kind of personal therapy, but instead a core linking mechanism that connects personally felt 'crucible moments' with their potential to catalyze transformative leadership journeys. They tie personal experiences and leadership identities into revitalizing participants' organizational realities, not just for themselves but, most importantly, for those they lead. Indeed, where we see significant transformational change, this linking mechanism has invariably been a core component at the heart of this work. It is far less about personal insights and individual change – although these are certainly important – than about finding ways of surfacing and re-animating the interpersonal dimensions of leadership. A core design challenge is to develop this in ways that are generative and supportive but also personally challenging – stimulating leadership journeys that involve purposeful shifts in how participants relate to themselves and others.

There is a vital 'synaptic gap' between what the program design intends and what participants actually experienced

Creating optimal design tensions for sense-making

Leaders' hunger to experience passion and energy in program material was another major theme in our findings. Participants want the latest material and ideas that will provoke and 'take them to the edge', moving them towards leadership challenges that they have forgotten about, defensively avoided or been too cautious to tackle. This presents particular challenges for program design, linked to the abilities of faculty teams who are skilled at translating knowledge into memorable and usable experiences. Typically, business school academics tend to be well versed in their own disciplines, but less familiar at translating these into leadership challenges, while non-academic faculty more steeped in the business world tend to be less engaged with current developments in business school knowledge. Yet this is an important area of tension that pays dividends when program design gets the balance right – complementing cutting edge research insights with real world business know-how. As one participant described, "our tutor was like the conductor in our choir, he harmonized the team, so we were all focused on one goal of helping each other. And by providing knowledge that was not present in our group, he had the crucial role. It was the most valuable element of the entire course."

However, creating the right level of tension between program elements can be a major aspect of what ultimately drives learning and change. According to our research, there is a vital 'synaptic gap' between what the program design intends and what participants actually experienced. In fact, participants can be highly sensitive to what some experience as 'programmatic' or boilerplate design, where content-heavy curricula readily undermines program effectiveness. Unsurprisingly, 'offline conversations' are not just opportunities to network informally over coffee or at the bar, but tend to create multiple opportunities for participants to connect with and amplify their experience. Bridging the gap between what is designed, leaders' actual experiences during the program, and how they then later return to and apply this experience is a significant and powerful tool in their sense-making.

For similar reasons, the research underlines the importance of not being wedded to overly prescriptive leadership models and formulas. Instead, the 'plasticity' of the leadership concept shone through as a key mechanism for effective leadership development. This flies against many prevailing ideas that seek to pin down leadership according to specific styles, frameworks or competences. Instead, our research found that a more open and flexible definition of leadership is invaluable for the leadership development process, as individuals tend to identify with certain aspects of leadership more readily than others, prompting them to consider experimenting with and expanding their repertoire of leadership skills. In fact, although the *Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme* and *High Performance Leadership* emphasise rather different leadership models (one developing transformative leadership journeys, the other based on a more planned approach to team design), we found that in each program participants most effectively developed leadership practices through ambitious interpersonal accomplishments with others, rather than by following a particular style or model.

Designing leadership programs for long-term transformational change

Our research contradicts some long established ideas of management education which focuses on the idea of aligning various elements within curricula design. In fact, we found the most effective leadership development experience involves a shift towards

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transforming participants' personal experiences and contexts, not merely before and during the program, but crucially by embedding change in their actual leadership practices afterwards.

Some participants experience a 'eureka' moment instantly, "a diagram went up… (not) an epiphany moment, more a thunderstorm. I suddenly realized who and what I worked for is utterly, utterly dysfunctional… It was a thunderstorm that cracked overhead." Yet others, grasping to make sense of their experience, may powerfully do so only much later. "After the program, I realized that all these elements need to be joined up, I started thinking clearly and doing this differently. As the pieces started to come together, I found myself able to move on to a higher level." In fact, participants' ability to make sense of and internalize the experience, not merely during programs, but as they continue to work on it during the weeks and months afterwards, is a central aspect of executive education that is overlooked in most program design. A major finding of our study is that effective executive leadership education should be designed as a 6-month voyage, rather than as a 6-day excursion.

Overall, our findings indicate that developing a rigorous scrutiny on these 'backstage' aspects of how executive leadership development works in practice should be a major focus in shifting the leadership industry from its reliance on anecdotal evaluations and the pursuit of fads and fashions, to developing an evidence base of what is and what is not effective. As Harvard Business School's dean, Nitin Nohria, argues, at a time when societies around the world are crying out for more and better leadership, there has been a dearth of serious scholarly research into leadership and its development. We agree with this assessment and advocate integrating rigorous research, exploring in depth the practices and processes of leadership development over time. Indeed, there are impressive examples of comparable work elsewhere, such as research-intensive teaching hospitals, rapidly translating between basic research, teaching, and clinical practice. It is only by strengthening links between rigorous research, program design, and proto-typing new methods that we can accelerate a similar shift in the leadership industry towards building an empirical evidence-base for the design of transformative leadership journeys.

Six design principles for leadership development

1. Design programs as transformative leadership journeys that are anchored in participants' personal experiences, tailored to their specific organizational contexts, and carefully progress and embed their leadership practices in these contexts over a 6-9 month post-program period.
2. Programs should be designed not as vehicles for delivering supposedly aligned curricula, but as carefully calibrated sense-making devices with a particular value in the post-program period. As such, they need to emphasize process and form, building an optimum degree of tension between cutting-edge academic insights, practice-focused activities, and personal dimensions of leadership development.
3. The 'plasticity' of the leadership concept is a core mechanism for leadership development that seems to operate most effectively when emphasising organizational leadership and pragmatic impact above notions of personal styles or models. This is especially important for embedding leadership practices as part of a relational approach, instilling a sense of shared purpose and mission.

Effective executive leadership education should be designed as a 6-month voyage, rather than as a 6-day excursion

4. Programs should create ample opportunities for more personal 'formative spaces' to develop through which submerged narratives and quieter voices may be surfaced, encouraging participants to speak to each other's lives. Uncertainties, anxieties and contradictions are key elements of the work of leadership development, connecting processes of sense-making with the possibility of more enduring, transformative change.

5. In designing and delivering programs, diverse faculty teams (such as business school academics, experienced executives, as well as experts in group or social psychology) may provide an optimum way to straddle the divergent tasks of bringing in world-class academic rigour, business focused practical know-how, and more individually crafted personal development. Whereas some faculty may be unusually gifted at translating across two or more of these tasks, we argue that carefully composed teams can more effectively straddle and translate between these contrasting dimensions of leadership development.

6. Programs should integrate empirical research as a core element of their design, moving beyond self-report evaluations to in-depth studies of how leadership is actually developed and embedded in practice over time. By accelerating translation cycles that link research findings with program design, leadership development methods may be more precisely advanced and calibrated.

Michael Fischer is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne, Centre for Workplace Leadership, and he was previously senior faculty at the University of Oxford, Saïd Business School. Clinically trained as an individual and group psychoanalyst, his research and teaching focus on senior leadership development, especially in knowledge-intensive organizations.
michael.fischer@unimelb.edu.au

Andrew White is Associate Dean for Executive Education at Saïd Business School, and Fellow of Green Templeton College at the University of Oxford. An experienced program director, teacher and researcher, his areas of expertise include innovation management and leadership development.
Andrew.White@sbs.ox.ac.uk

Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

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