

Leadership

An Impact Study of the Praxis Leadership Development Program

Introduction

The major goal of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Praxis leadership development program within two employee-owned companies. In particular, the focus was to better understand the program's impact at the individual, team, and organization levels.

In conducting the study, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with twelve employees (6 from each company) who were selected based on perceptions of positive change in leadership performance. Participants were then asked if they would refer additional coworkers (leaders, direct reports, and peers) to be interviewed for the study. An additional nine "other" interviews from five of the participants were conducted. Interviewees were probed for examples and/or critical incidents to illustrate leadership development. They were also asked to give a numerical rating of perceived change of leadership skills on a 6 point Likert scale.

Thematic analysis showed that participants had made changes as a result of participation in the program. In addition, the majority of participants ranked the program as highly valuable, useful, and a learning experience that challenged their thinking about themselves and others. They also enjoyed and benefited from the interactions with their fellow employees and the opportunity to learn not only *with* them but *from* them.

Themes from the multiple levels were very much aligned with Goleman's framework

(2000) of emotional intelligence which includes the four domains of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. For example, impact data at the individual level indicated a greater awareness and regulation of self and others.

"I value the times when the greater good comes together and can be together, think together, and learn from one another."

While a few participants did report some anxiety and lack of confidence in implementing newly learned skills back in the workplace, they also described themselves as a work in progress -indicating that developmental efforts were ongoing.

Overall, the data strongly suggests a positive direction of

impact at all three levels, such that participants felt more effective and empowered in their roles and able to engage with others to positively affect their team and organization.

Individual

Some of the major themes for impact at the individual level included:

- **Greater Self-Awareness:**
Understanding their strengths and weakness through 360 degree feedback, what motivates them in their work roles, where they fell on the Leadership Compass, and greater awareness of their role in the organization.
- **Greater Social-Awareness:**
Being more conscious in recognizing and working with the diversity of skills and needs of other workers, thinking more

“She has a much more open attitude, a better understanding and appreciation of different people who she once thought had no value.”

about the best way to reach a person, having more empathy for the different struggles people have, and possessing a greater understanding and acceptance of

the “dualities” of organizational life.

- **Greater Self Management:**
Being less harsh in judging themselves, understanding their triggers - “what’s the story we tell ourselves,” gaining more confidence through practice and real life application, utilizing others for information and support, and being more conscious and



deliberate in allocating time for personal and professional needs.

Team

At this level, participants enacted greater relationship management with their team members by:

- Being more skilled at giving *and* receiving feedback - both negative and positive.
- Resolving longstanding employee-related problems utilizing skills learned from the program.
- Working to design and implement better work processes and structures (i.e., meeting and time management).

- Empowering team members through delegation
- Being less focused on “blaming” and more proactive in problem-solving.
- Engaging more with members of their own team as well as across teams.
- Mentoring others on skills learned from the program.

Organization

Program participants went on to influence and affect change at the organizational level by:

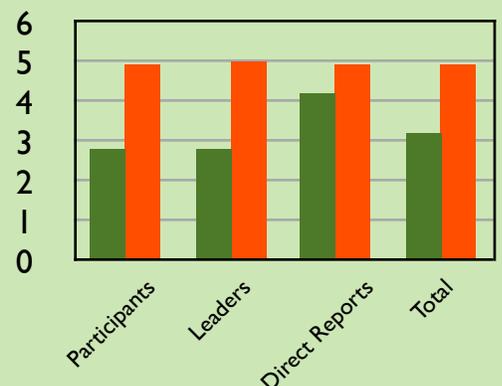
- Creating and taking advantage of opportunities to have a greater voice and impact in their organization’s strategic initiatives and directives.
- Developing a formal leadership training for hourly team leaders that was modeled after the Praxis program.
- Utilizing relationships formed from the Praxis program for interdepartmental cooperation in the workplace.
- Providing greater clarity and implementation of Smart Goals across the organization.
- Delegating and empowering a manufacturing unit to design and implement a quality control program.

Self and Other Ratings of Leadership Development

As part of the interview process, participants, their leaders, and direct reports were asked to rate the participants on their leadership skills on a scale of 1 to 6 before and after the Program. (6 being outstanding and 1 being poor). Ratings were calculated for each group as well as for the total. Results indicate a positive increase in perceived leadership development.

■ Before
■ After

Average Ratings of Leadership Skills



Top Content Areas

360 Degree Feedback

When participants were asked to talk about parts of the program that had the most impact on them, they often spoke about their experiences with giving and receiving feedback, empowerment, delegation, and the individual/ group projects.

The 360 assessment as well as lessons on giving and receiving feedback were particularly powerful parts of the program. For most, the 360 assessment results became the “jumping off point” for focusing their developmental efforts. While some found their initial feedback worrisome, all felt very positive about the feedback experience. Taking part in small group discussions, working with their leaders and learning partners, and receiving designated phone coaching contributed significantly to their learning and allowed them to digest the feedback in a nonthreatening way, which lowered feelings of anxiety and self-criticism. For one participant, seeing other leaders struggle with similar issues made him feel less alone and more open to learning.

Talking about 360 feedback with others also increased empathy by allowing participants to see and experience vulnerability in themselves and others. For some, it provided an opportunity to work through difficult feedback with their leaders back home. Lastly, it allowed participants to gain the support they needed and to develop relationships throughout the course and beyond.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

The art of giving and receiving feedback was seen as one of the most important and practical skill

developments to come from the program. In addition to learning the basic principles of feedback and active listening, participants spoke about how impactful it was to observe and take part in role plays. Practicing feedback skills through role plays and receiving input from others was seen as key in developing confidence and competence.

Participants spoke about “giving the gift of feedback” - a term they learned in the program and continue to use as a way of reframing the negative cognitions associated with having difficult conversations. Feedback was used as a means of developing others, not only to build up weaknesses but also to give praise and recognition. Participants possessed an increased awareness as to the importance of timing and how feedback might be received by the other person.

Empowerment

Interviews with members of one organization in particular revealed a culture that made it hard for people to feel a sense leadership. The entrepreneurial culture was described as “overly nice” and didn’t lean towards giving critical feedback. Its creative process relied heavily on collaboration and viewed the taking up authority as potentially polarizing and controversial.

However, the program had the effect of empowering the participants by helping them understand the dualities of their culture and the need to take up leadership roles in new ways, like being able to have difficult conversations and acting more boldly in changing their work processes. This had the rippling

effect of empowering others whose work was touched by their leadership.

Delegation

Empowerment was both a “cause and effect” of greater delegation in both organizations. Participants felt more empowered as leaders by learning how to delegate, and this had the effect of empowering their direct reports as well. Experiencing a “major wake up call” to teach greater independence and accountability while feeling “more equipped to push down decisions” gave participants the ability to work with direct reports to take on bigger responsibilities and roles in decision-making. Some, however, admitted that delegation was not always an easy thing to do. While things such as the lack of time, resources, and even trust made it challenging to delegate, participants felt strongly that it was the worth the effort.

Projects

Individual and group projects were a “duality” in that participants saw them as having *both* a positive and negative impact on learning. Participants, in reflecting about their experience or those of their teammates, described the projects on the one hand as an added source of stress and work overload and on the other hand, opportunities for greater exposure and influence within the organization. Several group and individual projects were mentioned as being incorporated into the companies’ strategic direction and operations. Whatever their experiences of the projects were, participants could see both sides of the impact. They also commended the staff for being open to their feedback on the projects and flexible with making changes to the program when necessary.

The Importance of Relationships in Leadership Development

Bonding

Perhaps one of the most powerful and enduring outcomes of the Praxis Leadership program has been the relationships formed between participants. According to the participants, having the program offsite and overnight, along with the intense demands of the program forced them to focus and immerse themselves in ways with others that wouldn't normally happen in their work lives back home. For some, the chance to attend with other members of their organization gave them greater insight into the worker and the work that is being performed outside of their departments.

Taking part in role plays, working together on group projects, consulting with their learning partners, meeting with their leaders, and observing and interacting with others in large groups were just some of the relational activities that encouraged participants to learn *about* one another as well as *from* one another. These relationships have and continue to be utilized for support, continued skills building, and implementing new work processes across the organization.

Relations with Program Staff

Staff relations was often cited by participants as an important component of leadership learning. Participants felt that the staff facilitated their development by modeling many of the skills they were trying to teach such as being "ridiculously good listeners" and giving timely feedback. They appreciated not only the staff's expertise and knowledge in leadership development, but also their straightforwardness in

expressing their viewpoint or advice when sought. Knowing when to create space for difficult emotions and when to push participants out of their comfort zone while also maintaining a sense of humor and flexibility were important factors in keeping participants connected to the material and to the staff. Overall, participants felt cared for and supported by the staff, whose outreach sometimes extended beyond the formal ending of the program.

A System of Attachments: The Holding Environment

Since relationships are the cornerstone of strong leadership, perhaps a more holistic way to conceptualize the leadership program is to think of it as a temporary holding environment for developing leadership skills. Kahn (2001) defines holding environments as a "system of attachments that anchor people in the midst of situations they experience as challenging or stressful.

As a holding environment, the Praxis Leadership Program created a relational context for learning that made it safe for participants to learn about themselves and others, to gain knowledge, and to explore new skills. It tested participants in some form or another, sometimes at the expense of creating anxiety, but also allowed them to feel supported and to emerge stronger from having gone through the experience. It acknowledged difficulties while encouraging participants to move way from their "weak" spots as they developed leadership capabilities both within themselves and with each other.

“Really, the biggest impact for me was the opportunity the program provides for building relationships with colleagues in the program. It creates that forum. It creates that out-of work atmosphere were you're like, you can leave the work and you leave the titles behind and your're not afraid to talk about issues that you're experiencing. Now we have a good relationship, and it's not because of anything we've done during work. It's because we went through the program together...”

Barriers to Development

The transition from the leadership program to the real work environment was sometimes difficult for participants. The most commonly cited barriers that got in the way of participants' motivation and/or ability to master newly learned leadership skills were:

- Time constraints and heavy work demands
- Already high levels of work stress
- Lack of consistent follow-up and reinforcement
- Lack of modeling by senior leaders
- Working with other employees who had not gone through the program

A Word of Caution

Sometimes in applying newly learned leadership skills, a person might not get the kind of positive reactions or changes they were looking for in the people they lead. In this study, there was an example of a serious disconnect between a leader and her direct report over the process of giving and receiving feedback. The leader spoke about her earnest, though sometimes awkward attempts, to deliver feedback to enhance the worker's performance and development. However, the worker perceived the feedback as overly-critical and lacking in emotional intelligence. It became apparent that each person saw things very differently. The leader spoke about the difficulties in trying to apply leadership skills with a worker who had not gone through the program, and the worker saw the program as having negatively affected her relationship with her leader.

While the program had changed the nature of their relationship, the case between the leader and the worker can serve as an important reminder that the implementation of newly learned skills can be a bit precarious and stressful back in the workplace. Thus, it is important to consider outside forms of

support for people who encounter difficulties such as these. Fortunately, at the time of the research study, these individuals were continuing their conversations to work through these issues.

Wishes and Recommendations

When participants were asked to reflect on things they might change about the program, they cited the following:

- Cover less but delve deeper into topics
- More time to practice after program
- Post-program assessment (360 feedback) to evaluate improvements
- Periodic follow-up training or group sessions
- Keep contact with facilitators while applying new skills
- Find ways to keep learnings alive and utilize program graduates to invoke organizational change and build upon existing knowledge

The Relevancy Factor

How relevant is the Praxis Leadership Program for employee-owned companies? Participants and their coworkers overwhelmingly described this program as being even *more relevant* given the unique needs and demands of their companies where all employees "have skin in the game." One participant summed up the sentiments of many in his statement:

"For the employee owners, I think it is really important because we are all basically at the end of the day accountable for each other. There is a different vibe here than there is in the corporate world...We're really passionate about what we're doing. So investing in developing each other and making everyone the best that they can be and trying to make sure that we're in an environment where everyone is playing their position and playing it to the the best of their ability, I think, that's really important."

This research was led by Dr. Cornelia Roche of [Sugar Maple Row Associates](#) in collaboration with Drs. Ted Freeman and Ginny Vanderslice of Praxis Consulting Group, with a special thanks to Dr. Cary Cherniss, Rutgers University, for his consultation. The analysis presented in this summary is based on the full report, *An Impact Study of the Praxis Leadership Development Program*, submitted in January 2014.