

Book Review on Leader Development

*An Integrative Approach to Leader Development:
Connecting Adult Development, Identity, and Expertise*
David Day, Michelle M. Harrison and Stanley M. Halpin
New York: Routledge, 2009



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‘Without theory, there is no touchstone for making informed, scientifically grounded decisions ... for advancing leader development in an informed and systematic manner’

Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009: xii)

The above quote delineates the central objective of Day, Harrison and Halpin’s (2009) contribution to the leader development literature. The authors acknowledge that there is no shortage of leadership theories as well as practices which seek to develop leadership. Instead their hostility lies with the fact that scant research attention has been devoted to actually developing a theory of leader development. Despite over a century of leadership research, one central question still lingering is how do leaders and leadership develop? A number of eminent leadership scholars have acknowledged the lack of attention dedicated to answering this question from a theoretical perspective (e.g. Avolio, 2007; Day, 2000; Riggio and Mumford, 2011). Adopting more theoretically based approaches to test how leader development occurs can only help to build a better science and practice of leader development (Riggio and Mumford, 2011). Indeed this is what Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) seek to do in their cutting-edge book, where they propose an integrative approach to leader development, one with rich and diverse theoretical foundations.

The authors make a case for the need to integrate sound theory into the study of leader development by highlighting its intertwined nature with practice. For example, the authors point out that decision making will be ill-informed if leader development is void of scientific consideration. Their logic is that without adequate theory to explain leader development, important practical decisions and potential returns on investment will be hampered. On the academic front, the authors argue that without theory there will be no framework for

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advancing leader development research in an informed and systematic manner (p. xii). Given the calls for more research into what constitutes genuine or authentic leader development (e.g. Avolio, 2005), the inclusion of a strong theoretically grounded approach such as the one advocated by Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) is important and timely. So how well does Day, Harrison and Halpin's (2009) contribution advance the argument for incorporating a more theoretically rigorous approach into leader development?

The book is skilfully structured in six main sections. Section I is designed to introduce the reader to what constitutes theory, thus setting the stage for understanding the various theoretical lenses to examine the process of human and leader development. Sections II and III are dedicated to discussing leader development by drawing on adult development literature and subsequently by delving deeper into the more fundamental aspects of adult development such as moral and identity development. The weighted focus on adult development is interesting because it recognises that leader development is a complex lifelong process (e.g. Avolio, 2005). In this section, the authors also highlight the importance of personal trajectories of development and consequently offer researchers a number of guidelines for studying leader development over time. This focus by the authors has undoubtedly influenced the current research agenda on leader development, evidenced by the 2011 special issue in the *Leadership Quarterly* dedicated to longitudinal studies of leader development.

Section IV discusses learning-based approaches to leadership. The authors emphasise the role of mental models, gaining expertise and adult learning for leader development (p. 15). Although there is nothing novel about the theoretical perspectives on education and learning, the authors challenge the traditional andragogy framework predominant in leader development research. Instead they adopt ideas from scholars associated with the centre of creative leadership and in doing so pave the way for the use of the theoretically and practically grounded assessment-challenge-support model of development, which in their view offers more holistic insights.

Section V – the centrepiece of this book – splendidly integrates all of the interwoven theories into the authors' proposed integrative theory of leader development. The authors link leadership expertise (or the expert leader) at the most visible level, supported by leader identity and self-regulation processes at a meso level, with adult development at the foundation. With adult development at the foundation, their adoption of the selection-optimisation-compensation orchestrating process of successful and healthy ageing (e.g. Baltes, 1997) is an intriguing advance to the study of leader development. This process explains the lifespan building blocks in terms of adults setting and sticking to life goals (selection), using resources effectively in pursuing life goals (optimisation) and responding adaptively and effectively when goals are blocked or resources unavailable (compensation). Faced with the challenge of explicating a range of diverse and complex theories into one framework, the authors manage to convey their theory in a comprehensible and concise manner through their use of interesting and appropriate analogies. In the final section of the book, the authors conclude by offering an extensive range of possible hypotheses for testing with the aim of inviting researchers to test their integrative approach. The extensive

work in developing these hypotheses will undoubtedly fuel substantial research to further elucidate the process of leader development.

Overall, this book is informative and insightful, suited for both an academic and practitioner audience. Attempting to provide a theory of leader development through synthesising existing scientifically sound research is an important advancement in the leadership field that will inevitably inform those responsible for leader development in organisations. At the end of each chapter Day, Harrison and Halpin provide a summary of the main theoretical perspectives and discuss their relevance for leader development. Although this section clearly highlights the linkages between the specific theories and their relevance for leader development, perhaps such sections would have had greater utility by offering more specific guidelines for practitioners. Although adult development processes underpin the overall theory they propose, perhaps surface level manifestations of leader development that are easier to accelerate should have received greater attention. Without disputing the fact that leader development is a lifelong process that develops over time in adults, little hope is provided by the authors when referring to the ten-year time frame necessary to develop as an expert leader (p. 180). This might not translate well for practitioners and even researchers on an intuitive level because 'we do not have a life time to develop leadership' (Gardner et al., 2005: 368). In this regard the authors missed out on an opportunity to draw on the recent research in the realm of positive organisational scholarship (e.g. Spreitzer, 2006), which offers unique insights into accelerating leader development in a shorter time frame. Notwithstanding that the authors' objective was to offer a theory of army leader development, one wonders whether the book would have greater appeal and relevance if more congruent with an organisational perspective. However, the crux of the problem resides with the fact that leader development by its very nature is a complex and context-dependent phenomenon. Not only are there significant differences in how individuals develop but an abundance of environmental factors play a pivotal role (p. 47).

In sum, *An Integrative Approach to Leader Development: Connecting Adult Development, Identity, and Expertise* represents a substantial contribution to the leadership field as it offers an all-encompassing and theoretically rich account of the process of leader development. To date, this avenue of research is mainly unexplored. Given its central objective of laying theoretical foundations and offering testable hypotheses, the book is primarily aimed at an academic audience. Nevertheless, the book would be a useful guide for human resource professionals in designing leader development interventions that are theoretically grounded. In line with their initial objective, Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) have done much to advance the scientific study of leader development, but a number of concerns such as the time required and the context of leader development still persist. Nonetheless, the authors' contribution to the academic literature in particular is commendable and indeed timely.

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