

Leadership Development: Crisis, Opportunities and the Leadership Concept

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Abstract

In this paper, we address two different types of crises. The first one refers to a crisis in the leadership development literature. We suggest that its resolution relies on focusing on the *leadership concept* – the schemata organizations have embedded in their culture about leadership. We believe that the role of leadership development is to renew these assumptions, so that they reflect the new challenges organizations face. The second type of crisis refers to the pragmatic challenges facing organizations. We suggest that the context of crisis provides ideal circumstances for promoting changes in the leadership concept, as schemata are more malleable then. In addition, we argue that sensemaking may be a possible mechanism for renewing the leadership concept due to its role in schemata changes during times of ambiguity and uncertainty, such as those of crisis.

Keywords: cognitive schemata; crisis; implicit leadership theory; leadership development; organizational culture; sensemaking.

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Introduction

When an organization faces serious crises, leadership is required to guide the organization through this phase and ensure its survival (Mumford et al, 2007). In situations such as this, however, leadership cannot simply be a repetition of practices previously regarded as 'good leadership', as these may well have contributed to the failures that led to the crisis or a failure to respond adequately to the crisis. The new context imposed by a crisis situation transforms not only the social milieu in which leadership is embedded (Osborn et al, 2002), but also the cognitive processes, resources and strategies that must be utilized by leaders to resolve the crisis (Mumford et al, 2007). These changes create a significant impact on what is required for leadership effectiveness, and thus they need to be addressed in leadership development if leadership development activities are to increase the capability of organizations to deal with such crisis situations. Yet, while several scholars have recognized the need to address contextual situations in leadership theories and definitions (e.g. Avolio, 2007; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999), this acknowledgement has thus far been largely absent in the leadership development literature. Indeed, both theories and practices of leadership development have engendered mounting criticism for not incorporating new conceptualizations of leadership (e.g. Avolio, 2007; Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Carroll et al, 2008; Hollenbeck et al, 2006; Zaccaro & Horn, 2003), warranting us to assert that leadership development is itself in crisis.

We suggest that one of the main causes for this crisis in leadership development is the dominance of competency leadership frameworks, which advance "a modern version of the great person theory" (Hollenbeck et al, 2006:408), disregard the "subtle, moral, emotional and relational aspects of leadership" (Bolden and Gosling, 2006: 158), and "only articulate that which is objective, measurable, technical and tangible" (Carroll et al, 2008: 365). We propose that instead of focusing on the conscious and individualized perspectives of leadership that comprise a competency model, organizations need to focus on the unconscious and collective assumptions about leadership that delimit how organizational members perceive, attribute and evaluate leadership in their organizations. We use the term leadership concept to describe these assumptions, and we argue that the most important role of leadership development is to renew the leadership concept so that it reflects the new challenges, changes and strategic directions that organizations faces.

We are aware that modifying these collective, unconscious assumptions in an organization is a difficult task, as they represent embedded cultural assumptions that are socially transmitted and embody a group's cognitive defense mechanisms and its 'theories-in-use' (Schein, 2004). Paradoxically, however, when organizations face challenging and complex crisis situations, anxieties about the future might be harnessed to renew the leadership concept, as organizational members may be more open to identifying and changing their unconscious assumptions. Analyzing how the different characteristics of crisis contexts might influence leadership development, therefore, is invaluable for advancing our understanding and practice of developing leadership in organizations.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the essential role of the organization's unconscious and collective assumptions about leadership that should inform leadership

development and to suggest the appropriate conditions and potential mechanisms that can be utilized in renewing these assumptions.

The Achilles' heel of Leadership Development

Whilst some scholars have departed from a “individual/competency” approach, suggesting that leadership should be developed more collectively and contextually (e.g. Drath & Paulus, 1994; O'Connor & Quinn, 2004; Zaccaro & Horn, 2003), leadership development theories and practices have, for the most part, considered neither the circumstances in which leadership is enacted nor the context in which its development occurs (e.g., Shamir & Howell, 1999; Zaccaro & Horn, 2003). Indeed, even though contemporary studies acknowledge not only that collective forms of leadership are more adequate than individual ones to deal with the increased complexities and challenges organizations are facing (e.g. Drath et al, 2008), but also that leadership usually involves the dynamic interaction among multiple individuals (e.g. Friedrich et al, 2009), the leadership development literature still focuses primarily on the individual leader, overlooking new conceptualizations of leadership. The tendency towards theorizing about the development of the individual leader can be observed, for example, in the recent foci on the work experiences that might promote leadership skills (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Dragoni, 2009), on the individual's early life experiences (Ligon et al, 2008; Popper & Amit, 2009), and on the role of adult developmental processes (Day & O'Connor, 2003; McCauley et al, 2006; Mumford & Manley, 2003).

In addition, competency frameworks, which by definition are directly associated with the individual, still seem to dominate and influence thought in both leadership and leadership development (Carroll et al, 2008), albeit being denounced by a number of scholars (e.g. Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Carroll et al, 2008; Hollenbeck et al, 2006). In summary, leadership competency frameworks are costly and time-consuming endeavors whose designs are based on past and present successes that may or may not represent skills that will be useful to the future of the organization (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Carroll et al, 2008). They may also promulgate the notion that effective leadership can be defined, promoted and enhanced by a single set of independent, context-free and cumulative behaviors, traits and abilities, encouraging the belief that effective performance of leadership can be achieved by performing a standard set of prescribed behaviors that remain constant regardless of context (Carroll et al, 2008; Hollenbeck et al, 2006). For this reason, ‘competency thinking’ seems to lessen the importance of context for leadership, suggesting that individuals’ acts are isolated from those of others and from the organizational context (Carroll et al, 2008).

Proponents of leadership competency models argue that these models help connect the development of leadership with the organization's values and/or strategic objectives and aid individuals in assessing their own performance and developmental needs against skills and characteristics that will lead to success in their organizations (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Hollenbeck et al, 2006). Thus, these frameworks are viewed as encapsulating how organizations consciously define leadership for themselves. Nonetheless, we believe that this link between leadership competency frameworks and the organization's values, objectives and success is superficial, as these models do not consider implicit cultural and psychological processes. As individuals are normally unaware of the embedded assumptions about leadership that they utilize in their organizations, unearthing these intrinsic beliefs is a difficult task. As a result, what lies unconscious – embedded deep down in the assumptions of organizational members about leadership – is usually ignored in leadership development

initiatives. Nevertheless, we believe that it is precisely these assumptions that will directly impact an organization's ability to develop leadership.

Leadership: In the Eye of the Beholders

A social constructivist perspective proposes that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon whose meaning “may vary considerably across time and across firms” (Osborn et al, 2002: 805). Hence, in this view, leadership “is embedded in time, in a place and in the collective minds of the observers” (Ibid: 805), and therefore it is uniquely defined in each organization. This view of leadership is directly associated with a cognitive approach to leadership, which examines individual and collective cognitions (Lord & Emrich, 2001). Individual cognition involves perceptual and categorical processes that define and evaluate what leadership is for a particular individual through the use of knowledge structures. Knowledge structures, also known as schemata, decrease the complexity of information from the external world since, with these templates, the countless stimuli we receive from the external environment can be reduced and organized into a more manageable number of categories, that not only allow us to symbolically represent the world (and therefore develop such things as language and meaning) but also free mental resources to process more complex information (Lord & Maher, 1993; Wash, 1995).

Each individual has a mental representation of a prototypical leader in a schema termed *implicit leadership theory* (Lord et al, 1984; Lord & Maher, 1993). This schema, which includes the ideal characteristics and abilities of a leader, is activated when an individual interacts with a leader and/or acts as one, and thus shapes the individual's perceptions, behaviors, expectations and understandings of the leader-follower interaction (e.g. Engle & Lord, 1997). Humans develop implicit theories about phenomena in the external world in order to ascribe causes and consequences to events, to observe patterns and stability to the world, and to give meaning to their experience (Hunt, Boal, & Sorenson, 1990). This automatic processing might be nullified by more controlled cognitive processes, in which an individual deliberately thinks and infers leadership based on actions and outcomes; however, this controlled processing requires cognitive resources, which might not be available to the individual (Lord & Maher, 1993). Thus, when encountering a leader, followers might automatically compare this leader with the leader prototype they have developed, judging whether this individual can indeed be distinguished as a leader and whether this individual is an effective or ineffective leader.

Since different individuals will have experienced the world differently, their implicit leadership theories will not be identical (Hall & Lord, 1995). In fact, studies have indicated that implicit leadership theories can be influenced by many background variables, such as early childhood experiences, personality traits and national culture (Hunt et al, 1990; Keller, 1999). Nevertheless, several individuals can still ascribe the label of leader to the same person, as categorization into prototypes does not entail a perfect match (Hall & Lord, 1995). Thus, only a pattern of overlapping similarities is necessary for a group to agree upon the same category.

In addition, categorization is not the only cognitive process that influences perception and attribution of leaders and leadership. For instance, *transference*, a relationship-based psychological process, can also lead to the formation of mental representations of how leaders should behave (Ritter & Lord, 2007). In transference, however, the mental representation is formed not by a symbolic ideal, but from memory and interactions with past leaders. Interestingly, transference processes might affect acceptance of new leaders to a

particular organization, as members would have had shared experiences with the same leaders in the past. Thus, even though their implicit leadership theories might trigger different conceptualizations of leadership, members' transference processes would trigger a shared schema based on shared experience. This is important for the formation of a common leadership concept at an organizational level as empirical evidence suggests that encounters with leaders who have characteristics similar to a past leader will be judged based on the previous experience (transference) instead of prototypes (Ritter & Lord, 2007).

Psychological archetypes can also influence perceptions of leadership. Archetypes compose the collective unconscious, which is filled with a rich symbolic tapestry that produces consistent themes and roles in myths and fables. Some of these archetypes can be linked with the role of a leader in a community, which creates uniformity among some of the characteristics individuals associate with leadership. Psychological archetypes might explain notions of ideal leadership that are shared by different cultures. For instance, a study of 62 countries suggested that there are attributes of leadership (such as honesty, trustworthiness and intelligence) that are universally endorsed, even though the manner in which these attributes are enacted might vary from culture to culture (House et al, 2004).

The Leadership Concept

When individuals come together, each with their particular schemata, a collective knowledge structure is likely to develop (Walsh, 1995). This collective cognition is constructed through social interactions among members of an organization, and therefore it is more than the sum of individual perceptions and categorizations of leadership (Lord & Emrich, 2001). Hence, when joining an organization, each individual will have had different life experiences prior to entering the company and thus might bring with them different implicit leadership theories to the organization; nonetheless, as the prototype that an individual has about ideal leadership is not static (Lord et al, 2001), members of an organization usually develop shared cognitive prototypes (Dickson et al, 2006). This development is possible because, when utilizing abstract categorizations (such as leadership), individuals form 'fuzzy categories', that is, categories in which there is not a clear-cut boundary separating members of one category (leaders) from the other (non-leaders) (Rosch, 1978). Due to this lack of a clear set of characteristics, individuals learn to rely on the parameters of categorization that are transmitted culturally (Hartog et al, 1999), and, as a consequence, individuals of the same national culture develop similar implicit leadership theories (e.g. House et al, 2004) and so do individuals of the same organization (Lord & Maher, 1993; Schein, 2004).

The culture of the organization might shape shared cognitive prototypes for leaders through several mechanisms, including homogeneity and socialization (Hall & Lord, 1995). Psychological and demographic homogeneity arise by processes of pressure, such as those suggested by the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model (Schneider, 1987). As organizations have a tendency of attracting, selecting and maintaining individuals with similar traits, attitudes and demographic backgrounds, these individuals are likely to have had similar life experiences, increasing the likelihood that they also have similar implicit leadership theories (Hall & Lord, 1995). Socialization – defined as “the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (Louis, 1980:229-230) – is the mechanism by which members learn about the organizational culture (Ibid). As such, it can influence members' perception of leadership by

advocating scripts for good performance, by priming and rewarding particular schemata, by suggesting ways of processing information and by influencing sensemaking (Lord & Maher, 1993).

Due to the power of these social processes, the leadership prototypes held by organizational members, in the end, will be embedded in the assumptions prescribed by the organization's culture (Lord & Maher, 1993). These collective implicit leadership theories often originated with the founder's implicit leadership theory, or from those of the organization's earliest leaders, since this is the common origin of organizational values transmitted culturally (Gagliardi, 1986), but these collective leadership theories might also have evolved together with the culture of the organization (Schein, 2004). Hence, organizational members are likely to have shared implicit leadership theories that are unique to a particular organization and that are transmitted as part of its culture (Lord & Maher, 1993). In fact, these shared implicit leadership theories can be considered central to the leadership culture of the organization because of the strong association between the culture of an organization and its embedded assumptions (Schein, 2004) and also between assumptions and schemata (Lord & Maher, 1993). The schemata or assumptions that organizational members have about leaders and leadership have been termed the *leadership concept* in this paper. The leadership concept can, therefore, be defined as *the set of schemata and assumptions about leaders and leadership that an organization has embedded in its culture*.

As the organization culture might incorporate several sub-cultures (Schein, 2004), so too can the leadership concept. Organizations – especially large multinationals – might have a variety of 'sub-leadership concepts', as members of different divisions, departments, professions, cultures, etc, develop the assumptions of their respective sub-cultures. Nevertheless, as organizations usually reflect the mindset and values of the CEOs and/or top teams (Giberson et al, 2009; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Lyles & Schwenk 1992), there might still be one dominant leadership concept that will be unconsciously expressed and rewarded throughout an organization.

Hence, we suggest that the leadership concept has a central role in how leadership is enacted in an organization, functioning as the foundation from which leadership can be evaluated, developed and influenced. Nevertheless, this foundation – since it develops with the history of the organization – might need to be updated to reflect new changes, strategic directions and challenges that the organization faces. We believe that the most important role of leadership development is to produce this renewal. Interestingly, it is especially in situations of crisis that the leadership concept can impact, and be impacted, the most; and thus, situations of crisis can also be viewed as opportunity for promoting leadership development.

Rearranging Chairs: Of the Titanic or the Office

'Crisis' has been utilized indiscriminately in management research, as the term has been used to study both catastrophic events and mundane contexts (Hannah et al, 2009). Although in most studies a definition of crisis as "a dramatic departure from prior practice and sudden threatening of high priority goals" (Osborn et al, 2002: 809) can be employed, we believe that several characteristics might impact the demands a particular situation produces on leadership. For instance, crises might vary in relation to their probability of occurrence, the need for leaders to "sell" the crisis situation to other organizational members, the psychological impact it produces, and the perceived time-frame available for a response. A crisis situation produced by a traumatic event (such as a natural disaster or a terrorist attack)

has a very low probability of occurrence, is immediately perceived by all stakeholders involved, produces serious psychological impact as it shatters individuals' beliefs that "bad things can't happen to me" and "doing the right thing will yield good things", and offers little time for responding (Pearson & Clair, 1998). These extreme circumstances of crisis are likely to promote the emergence of charismatic leadership (Bass, 2010) because in such times many individuals might lose their sense of worth and control, becoming frail, needy and helpless (Pearson & Clair, 1998).

Other situations – such as the restructuring of an organization, a merger or an important change in strategic orientation – can also be considered to be crises since they also depart from previous practices and can threaten or alter previous goals. Nevertheless, they no longer constitute low probability events, as they are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in organizations. Moreover, leaders might need to convince others that change is necessary even though the leaders themselves probably perceive that "the aura of impending doom and the immediate pressure to improve or perish is palpable" (Osborn et al, 2002: 809). Response times also vary in this case, with the leader not producing a 'reactive response' (Hannah et al, 2009) but an active one. In addition, albeit these more frequently-occurring crises usually produce anxieties and doubts (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004), they are probably less likely to produce crisis-specific pathologies (Smart & Vertinsky, 1977). In this article, we focus on this latter type of crisis, as we believe that it presents a unique opportunity for leadership development initiatives. Even though they represent a more mundane and widespread type of crisis, these change-based crises still imply transformations from usual procedures, mindsets and 'ways of knowing the world', and also entail the formulation of novel solutions. As such, they require extensive cognitive resources (Mumford et al, 2007), from the limited capability that humans possess (e.g. Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Miller, 1956), but without overwhelming or impairing cognitive functions, as extreme crises can provoke.

Organizational members involved in either extreme or changed-based crises will devote most of their cognitive resources to dealing with the problem of resolving the situation, and as a result, very little or no resource will be available for them to consciously contemplate everyday issues, such as the enactment of leadership. Members will deal with these everyday issues unconsciously, utilizing their existing schemata as the parameter for perception and behaviour (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Thus, as crises encourage more automatic processing for stimuli that are not directly involved in solving its challenges, implicit leadership theories and leadership concepts are probably more likely to be activated. In an extreme situation, the prototype of a powerful and charismatic leader is probably triggered because the helplessness and loss of control that these situations can engender might activate a more primitive leadership prototype that was formed in childhood (Lord & Maher, 1993), resembling the relationship with a good parent (Popper & Maysel, 2003). In a more mundane crisis context, the leadership that will be enacted, perceived and rewarded is likely to be one that matches the organization's assumptions about leadership. This is because crisis generates a cognitive overload, which might inhibit individuals from consciously considering whether their actions and outcomes could be evaluated as effective leadership (Lord & Maher, 1993).

Empirical evidence provides support for this proposition. It has been shown that individuals are more likely to prescribe leadership-consistent behaviors and attributes for leaders during crisis than during non-crisis situations (Emrich, 1999). Since individuals "often experience difficulty distinguishing between observed and unobserved behaviors that are prototypical of leadership" (Lord & Emrich, 2001: 557), this increased perception of

leadership-consistent behaviors might be due to a stronger activation of individuals' implicit leadership theories, which at an organizational level would correspond to the leadership concept. An unusual example of this finding occurred in an organization in which one of the authors was part of a team consulting on a major organizational restructuring. Senior managers in that organization continually referred to a particular member of the Board, who they described as intransigent and callous, but who exemplified how leadership was enacted in the organization. They would recount the various "war stories" of dealing with this person, and in so doing avoided actively adopting new practices as a leadership cadre, and even denied their own power to bring about change. Sometime into the consultation, the author learned that the particular Board member to whom the senior manager team kept referring had, in fact, been dead for 10 years! Yet, during the period of crisis, which lasted for more than a year while the whole organization was adopting a new strategic direction, the collective memory of this powerful individual, who had been an important leader for the history of the organization, was still vividly represented in the minds of the team members in such a way that the shared recollection about him surfaced, triggered by the anxieties of the change initiative. The senior managers relived the collective memory of the intransigent Board member as if he was still there – therefore experiencing difficulties in discriminating currently observable behaviors from behaviors that they no longer witnessed. This example also illustrates the resistance faced when trying to change the unconscious assumptions that form an organization leadership concept. The senior managers resurrected their collective memory of the intransigent Board member as a way of reinforcing their leadership concept, which suggests that they were experiencing difficulties in reviewing how they should begin to operate as leaders in the new situation brought about by the change initiative.

Crisis, the Leadership Concept & Leadership Development

As illustrated in the example above, a first reaction to a change-based crisis might be to intensify the use of the leadership concept, while most cognitive resources are devoted to solving problems and defining new strategies. However, as the crisis situation develops and new ways of 'doing things around here' are implemented – for instance, in a strategic redirection or merger – the ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding the new ways are likely to put into question, and consequently change, the assumptions that organizational members have utilized in the past to deal with one another (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bartunek, 1984; Huff et al, 2000). For instance, Balogun & Johnson (2004) observed that the schemata middle managers had about their organization changed over time to incorporate the implementation of a major organizational restructuring. In the beginning of the implementation period, middle managers tried to utilize their old assumptions about their roles and responsibilities, but as those assumptions were not longer valid in the new structure of the organization, they replaced the old assumptions with new ones that were more compatible with the new organizational reality. In our example of the dead Board member, the consultants worked with metaphors and stories to uncover the assumptions about leadership that operated in the organization and the attitudes that senior managers were adopting about their leadership roles during the change. Once these became explicit the senior managers were able to create a new leadership concept.

It is important to notice that this process of exposing and renewing the leadership concept occurred several months into the work, when senior managers were feeling demoralized and knew that they weren't really making the necessary changes. This suggests, therefore, that the process of reevaluating unconscious assumptions does not occur without stress, conflict or group negotiation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Huff et al, 2000; Louis &

Sutton, 1991). After all, changing deeply-rooted and unconscious cultural assumptions – such as the leadership concept – is problematical since they embody the group’s cognitive defense mechanisms and its ‘theories-in-use’ (Schein, 2004). For this reason, reconsidering cultural assumptions not only can be very threatening and create high levels of anxiety but also can require some level of discomfort and disequilibrium in order to be achieved (Ibid). Nevertheless, as crises are already characterized by elevated stress levels – but usually without being as debilitating as the stress characteristic of extreme situations (Smart & Vertinsky, 1977) – it has been suggested that crisis may be the best time to promote cultural changes (Lord & Maher, 1993).

We believe that these characteristics of more mundane crisis situations– tension, conflict and group negotiation – are paramount for leadership development initiatives to be effective since, without them, individuals and organizations will not readdress and reevaluate their deeply-embedded leadership concept. Hence, both in the Balogun & Johnson (2004) study as well as in our example, there was enough tension, conflict, ambiguity, uncertainty and departure from the old ways of performing roles and responsibilities to allow these two groups of managers to reevaluate their assumptions. In addition, both groups also seem to have utilized a similar mechanism to develop their respective new schemata of their organizations or leadership concepts. In the Balogun & Johnson (2004) study, the new schemata stemmed from a new social interaction pattern that was forced upon them by the restructuring of the organization, causing individuals to negotiate their interpretations through gossip, rumors, shared stories and experiences of one another’s behaviors. In our example of the dead Board member, the consultants ran a workshop in which senior managers were asked to develop metaphors for their organization. These metaphors were prompted by guided imagery work, by collages that represented their experiences of the organization and by the consultants reflecting back to them the stories they had told and the language they used when describing the ‘good old days’ and their work experiences. They offered very vivid and interesting images, such as ‘we work underground, doing the dirty jobs’; ‘we just fix the plumbing when they tell us where the leak is’. Once these became explicit the senior managers were able to create a new leadership concept involving their role in lifting their heads (coming up from underground) and seeing for themselves what needed to be fixed. Hence, this suggests that a narrative and conversational process, which has been defined as sensemaking by many authors (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995), and which has been observed in organizational collective schemata change (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Labianca, 2000) might be involved in uncovering and changing the leadership concept. Consequently, we believe that sensemaking processes could be utilized in leadership development initiatives to allow the organization to evaluate and, if necessary, renew its leadership concept.

In order to do so, leadership development initiatives probably need to emulate some of the conditions of situations of crisis that promote the conditions for changing schemata, since sensemaking usually occurs in ambiguous and unusual situations – such as in crises – that contradict or cannot be explained by current collective assumptions (Weick, 1995). For instance, one may bring to the foreground some of the assumptions of the ‘sub-leadership concepts’ and endorse an important discussion to expose the organization’s dominant and alternatives stories, history, language and metaphors used in relation to leadership. As individuals are emotionally attached to their assumptions, the ‘conflictual edge’ that most likely arises from individuals defending their own assumptions might provide a powerful narrative that can be explored and discussed to evaluate the leadership concept.

Moreover, even though the leadership concept is a collective schemata, it should also be considered in tailoring programs for the individual leader, because the embedded assumptions of the leadership concept will be used by individual participants as a basis of comparison not only for the acceptance of program material during the course but also for the transfer of learning back into the organization. In other words, since the leadership concept is so ingrained in the organization's processes and routines and the minds of its members, like any cultural assumption, a leadership development experience will have to influence the leadership concept, or all of the learning that occurs in the program might be superficial. Indeed, it could be argued that the lack of success of many leadership development programs and especially the lack of transfer of learning back to the organization might be due to an indifference or inability of these programs to consider the leadership concept. Further, it also could be suggested that a major inadequacy of leadership competency frameworks stems from a lack of consideration of the organization's leadership concept since it overlooks contextual and, more importantly, unconscious notions of leadership that are exclusive to a particular organization. We believe that the practice of leadership development can be improved if the leadership concept is utilized. By making the leadership concept explicit, the type of development a program offers can be more easily compared to desired leadership practices for the organization.

Discussion & Conclusion

Initially, familiar leadership practices may be a default position that enables the organization to deal with challenging events. However, over a longer period, these old leadership patterns, which may have even contributed to the crisis, and may be unsuitable leadership responses in the future, require review. Indeed a crisis, whilst initially reinforcing tried and tested leadership practices, may paradoxically provide the impetus for a review as the residual anxiety may be sufficient to prompt the organization to re-think several assumptions, including its leadership model (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

We suggest that renewing the organization's leadership concept, which comprises all the assumptions an organization has embedded in its culture about leadership, is the most important role of leadership development initiatives. As these assumptions shape the way organizational members perceive, act and evaluate leadership, the leadership concept can be considered a foundation that summarizes the way an organization conceptualizes leadership. Importantly, this foundation might need to be modified as it might be hindering the organization's ability to deal with new challenges and to advance towards new strategic directions. Changing these deeply-embedded assumptions requires some instability, and it is exactly by promoting a degree of anxiety that the context of crisis might facilitate adjustments in the leadership concept.

Hence, crisis helps uncover unconscious assumptions, and being aware of the leadership concept is the first step in reviewing its appropriateness for the future of the organization. If ignored, the potential for leadership development to form a platform for radical change in the expression of leadership in the organization is undermined. It is also likely that the developmental experiences that ensue will not be embedded into organizations leadership practices, which will continue to be informed by existing, unconscious and unrevised leadership assumptions. Without changing these assumptions, leadership development initiatives will be short-lived, as they will face the same types of resistance from which many change initiatives suffer (e.g. Labianca, 2000).

We propose that competency frameworks do not dig deeply enough, and so may not promote the change in leadership practices needed to meet the new challenges ahead. In this paper we critique the individual leader competency approach to leadership development, arguing that it leaves the leadership concept unexplored. The leadership concept can assist in promoting a different perspective to those offered by theories that only consider the development of the individual leader. In addition, since the leadership concept consists of the set of cultural assumptions an organization has about leadership and since changing these assumptions is probably as hard as changing any other assumptions within an organization's culture, we also could argue that leadership development beyond the individual leader can be best understood as a form of cultural change. These propositions would allow us to utilize the vast literature of organizational culture and cultural changes in order to develop a theory of leadership development. In this paper, we suggest one connection that can be made with the organizational change literature, namely that sensemaking processes might have a role in uncovering and reevaluating the assumptions of the leadership concept.

Thus, we believe that leadership development is itself in crisis because it does not sufficiently incorporate the leadership concept that underpins leadership practice in organizations. Only by exploring this concept can leadership development support an organization to meet the demands brought about by crises. We propose the leadership concept as an important construct for recasting leadership development in context as cultural change rather than individual change.

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