



INTERVIEW

Dialogue on leadership development

C. Manohar Reddy*, Vasanthi Srinivasan¹

Organizational Behaviour & Human Resources Management, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

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Abstract Sharing our considerable experience as teachers who have designed and conducted leadership development programmes, we discuss the challenges in the field of leadership development. We distinguish between leader development and leadership development; differentiate leadership theories from leadership development theories; discuss the goals of leadership development programmes and their implications for the design of such programmes – the *knowing, being* and *doing gap* and how the goal, cognitive understanding vs. deeper internalization vs. transformation would impact the design; the need to synthesize Western and Indian approaches to leadership development; and the importance of designing coherent leadership development programmes which combine multiple methods and approaches.

Context note

Leadership development is an important aspect of the learning and development function of large professional organizations. Globally, leadership development is a multibillion-dollar industry. While *leadership* is a topic that has been extensively researched over the last half a century and more, *leadership development* has not received the same degree of attention. In fact, the distinction between leadership and leadership development is often not made by researchers and practitioners and the two are

thought to be synonymous. The lack of clarity between the two concepts has led to confusion in the design of leadership development programmes. Inadequate clarity regarding the definition of leadership could result in competing assumptions regarding the objectives and goals of leadership development programmes.

In the ensuing dialogue on leadership development, we draw upon our experience as teachers and trainers who have designed and conducted leadership development programmes over the last few decades, to address some key issues which we believe are critical for the success of leadership development programmes. Some of the issues on which we have focussed are: (i) the difference between leader development and leadership development; (ii) differentiation of leadership theories from leadership development theories; (iii) differences in the goals/objectives of leadership development programmes: cognitive understanding vs deeper internalization and transformation of a participant;

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +91 80 26993152.

E-mail addresses: manohar@iimb.ernet.in (C.M. Reddy), vasanthi@iimb.ernet.in (V. Srinivasan).

¹ Tel.: +91 80 26993046.

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(iv) the gaps between *knowing*, *being* and *doing*; (v) the importance of coherence in the design of leadership development programmes while combining multiple methods and approaches and; (vi) the need for meaningful synthesis between Western theories and Indian approaches.

In our quest for deeper understanding of the leadership development process, we have been eclectic in drawing on research and theory from different traditions in the field of leadership development.

Leader development vs leadership development

As noted by Day (2000), the distinction between developing leaders and developing leadership is an important one. Leader development focusses on developing individual leaders whereas leadership development focusses on a process of development that inherently involves multiple individuals (e.g. leaders and followers or peers in a self-managed work team). Scholars make a distinction between the processes of leader development and leadership development (Hart, Conklin, & Allen, 2008). Leader development is “mostly directed at expanding an individual leader’s capacity” (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2005), whereas leadership development involves interaction between individual leaders and the social-cultural environment in which they function (Ardichvili & Manderscheid, 2008). Leader development is a necessary but not sufficient condition for leadership because “leadership requires that individual development is integrated and understood in the context of others, social systems, and organizational strategies, missions and goals” (Olivares, Peterson, & Hess, 2007). Leader development is about intrapersonal competence; leadership development involves building and using interpersonal competence (Day, 2000; Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Day (2000) also discusses the linkages with social networks by suggesting that while leader development is linked to protecting and enhancing human capital, leadership development is linked to building and enhancing social capital.

Given that leadership development is a dynamic process involving multiple individuals spanning various levels within and outside the organization, the process of leadership development is inherently interpersonal and long term in nature. Leadership development is the building and enhancement of a collective capacity to lead among members of a team. This collective capacity occurs through interactions, processes, and reciprocity anchored on trust.

Leadership theories vs leadership development theories

Leadership as a topic has been written about, researched and discussed so extensively that one wonders if there is anything new to say at all! It is almost impossible to summarize the vast expanse of the literature that populates the field. As new ideas emerge on leadership, questions on which of the paradigms of leadership are relevant and meaningful continue to confront managers. With the emergence of new theories of leadership, learning and development professionals keep experimenting with emerging methodologies of leadership

development. In spite of these efforts, over the years there seems to be a growing disconnect between what is propounded by the leadership school and the leadership development school.

The history of leadership theory and research spans nearly a century (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, 2009). Over the many decades, several leadership theories have emerged including trait theories, behavioural theories, contingency/context/situation based theories, leader–member exchange theories, and other theories such as servant-leadership, charismatic leadership, and transformational leadership. However, the dominant focus of these leadership theories has been on identifying traits/behaviour/characteristics required of a person to be an effective leader in a given context. One of the reasons leadership theory and research have contributed little to leadership development is possibly the long-standing focus on linking personality with leadership (Day et al., 2014). As Day notes, “If personality is conceptualized in terms of traits that summarize relatively enduring dispositional tendencies (House, Shane, & Herold, 1996), then its relevance for studying development (i.e., change) is questionable”.

Another popular approach in leadership research is the behavioural approach. It is well understood that behaviours can be learnt and modified based on the context; the focus of this school has dominantly been on training rather than on development. There is also a widespread misconception that if one could agree on the “correct” leadership theory then the development piece would inevitably follow (Day et al., 2014). Developing individual leaders and developing effective leadership processes involve more than deciding which leadership theory is to be used to motivate effective development.

In comparison to the century-long research on leadership, the history of scholarly work on leader/leadership development is relatively short. Further, leadership development is inherently longitudinal and multi-level (Day et al., 2014). Scholars in the field of leadership development have been more eclectic and have drawn on a range of theories to explain the process of development: these include theories from the field of ongoing adult development (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009), constructive development theory (McCauley, Drath, Palus, O’Connor, & Baker, 2006), and individual leader and follower skills and attributes leading to team development (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004). Since leadership is a dynamic process occurring longitudinally, there is a need to focus on process theories to explore the phenomena more meaningfully. The call for research in the field of leadership development is towards a focus on personal trajectories of leaders, broadening the range of leadership development methods studied and identifying the outcome variable that is impacted through this process (Day et al., 2014).

Cognition vs internalization and deeper transformation

An implicit assumption in many of the theories mentioned above is cognitive – that if we *know* what it takes to be an effective leader, we can *choose to behave* in the most appropriate way as suggested by the specific theory and

thus enhance our leadership effectiveness. There seems to be an unstated assumption that *knowing* will/can automatically lead to requisite changes in the *being* and *doing* of an individual.

As teachers and trainers in the field of leadership and management development for more than two decades, we have observed that *knowing* does not automatically lead to requisite changes in the *being* and *doing* of an individual. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) refer to the knowing–doing gap in the context of knowledge management and organizations. They identify barriers that contribute to the gap, namely: talking and action – the belief that by talking about something one is actually doing that something; memory as a substitute for thinking – that people often act without reflecting; fear – of punishments, risks, bosses, and other consequences; internal competition resulting in adversarial behaviours that stop learning and collaboration; and finally, measurement and evaluation that gets people to focus on short term results which people know that they should not be doing.

We believe that all these barriers manifest at the individual/collective level in the field of leadership development. Further, human development, particularly in the adult stage, involves a complex set of processes that need to be understood in their totality.

In our quest for ways of helping people to be more effective as managers and leaders, we searched for alternative paradigms and approaches to leadership development. We discovered that scholars and practitioners across the world are grappling with similar issues and have developed their own tentative models and theories of leadership development.

As a result of the challenges it faces, the nascent field of leader and leadership development tends to focus less on leadership theory and more on developmental science. In other words, there has been a change in focus associated with studies of leadership development, away from leadership research and towards understanding and enhancing developmental processes.

Researchers have identified aspects of an individual that contribute to developing leadership skills and expertise as part of the leader development process. These aspects include identity (Lord & Hall, 2005), cognitive and metacognitive skills (Marshall-Mies et al., 2000), approaches to understanding the underlying patterns of leadership skills (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007; Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000; Mumford, Zaccaro, Johnson, Diana, Gilbert, & Threlfall, 2000), and personality (deVries, 2012).

Our submission, based on our observation is that enhanced cognitive understanding at the individual level does not automatically translate into internalization and change in behaviour in the real world context. Often, instincts and prior conditioned reactive behaviour seem to take over during stressful contexts, instead of premeditated actions. The key question for a leadership development professional therefore, is how far and how meaningful are our leader development efforts? We believe that leader development methods need to be re-examined and methods that focus on bringing changes in *doing* and *being* need to be incorporated in the design of leader development programmes.

Importance of coherence in the design of leader development programmes

Leader development programmes often tend to be designed without adequate clarity regarding the aims and assumptions of leadership development. What is the objective of the leader development efforts? Is it mere exposure, cognitive understanding, or deeper internalization and behaviour change, or character development? Without this clarity, the design of leader(ship) development programmes often becomes an exercise in incorporating the latest fad, whether it is experiential learning, outbound learning, growth labs or appreciative inquiry. Since each of these methods brings its own assumptions and beliefs, building coherence and congruence across the approaches becomes an important task. Practitioners and researchers have been experimenting with various methods such as learning through participation in intense outbound experiences like trekking and climbing up mountain peaks (Useem, 2001), intense training labs, assessment and development centres and 360 degree feedback, action learning by engaging in live projects, and so on. But rarely have the designers explicitly examined the complementarity between these different methods and their coherence while conceptualizing the leader(ship) development programme. It is important to recognize that each of these methods has its own strengths and limitations. Classroom learning is very effective in providing cognitive understanding, while 360 degree feedback provides feedback on very specific task related and role related strengths and limitations of a person. Outbound learning programmes and growth labs provide flashes of deep insight to a leader about the way he/she thinks, feels and acts. Action learning provides opportunities for a leader to test out and internalize functional behaviours and capabilities. Coaching and mentoring are excellent tools to help a participant overcome dysfunctional behaviours and internalize more functional behaviours. Thus, each of these leader(ship) development interventions serves a different purpose.

Designers of leader(ship) development programmes need to examine the pros and cons of each of these methods and come up with a coherent design that is congruent with the assumptions they make regarding the leadership development process and the goals they have set.

Synthesis between Western theories of leadership and Indian approaches to personal development and self-transformation

Leadership studies in the Indian context have been dominated by the “culturalist” perspectives which argue that there are certain culture-specific expectations, shared by leaders and followers alike, that arise from socialization patterns within family (Garg & Parikh, 1995; Sinha, 1980, 1995). If the leadership theories inform the assumptions pertaining to leader development, then the personality characteristics of individuals which are informed by such culturally nuanced orientations are likely to impact the leader development process significantly. The most popular theory of nurturant task (NT) leader model incorporates a

combination of leadership styles and suggests that an ideal leader in India is both nurturing and task oriented. According to the theory, “NT leaders are warm and considerate, show affection, care for their subordinates, and are committed to their growth. However, their nurturance is contingent on the subordinate’s task accomplishment. The leader is a benevolent source, provided the subordinate respects and obeys the supervisor, works hard, and is highly productive” (Palrecha, Spangler, & Yammarino, 2012). The following three characteristics are thought to influence leader effectiveness in India namely, excessive dependency – where followers seek support, guidance, and encouragement in situations where they are apparently competent to make decisions and function without being patted on the back (Chattopadhyay, 1975); preference for hierarchy—where there is a strong status orientation and seniors are respected and obeyed; and finally, a preference for personalized relationships and thus a greater influence of informal networks on organizational decision making (Sinha & Kumar, 2004).

The review of literature on leader and leadership development so far draws largely on Western paradigms. We submit that it is critical for the success of leader(ship) development programmes in the Indian context to synthesize between Western theories and Indian insight and wisdom.

Researchers who have studied management practices in the Asian context (Chatterjee & Heuer, 2006; Neelankavil, Mathur, & Zhang, 2000) have noted that the business leaders in the region are able to maintain a duality of values—one field of value formation is drawn from their own cultural heritage, while the other impacts on them through the wider forces of internationalization (Bedi, 1991; Chatterjee & Heuer, 2006; Kakar, Kakar, Kets de Vries, & Vrignaud, 2002; Neelankavil et al., 2000). The liberalization of the Indian economy and the imperatives of globalization have created tensions between traditional, indigenous Indian values and the new, global values (Chatterjee & Heuer, 2006; Kao, Sinha, & Ng, 1995; Khandwalla, 1996). While the hybridization of management systems and personalization of relationships in the workplace (Neelankavil et al., 2000) of Indian managers has been studied, very little is known about how these manifest in the workplace. A study comparing Indian CEOs with CEOs in the U.S. (Kakar et al., 2002) found that despite the former group’s extensive exposure to Western management concepts and practices, the influence of Indian culture on senior managers’ perceptions of top leadership has not disappeared. On the one hand, Indian CEOs were criticized as being authoritarian in some aspects of their behaviour; on the other, they received greater idealization from their teams of senior managers than was the case in the Western sample. Sinha and Kanungo (1997) noted that “work” for Indian workers involves more than what is accomplished in one’s job. Indian workers greatly value good relationships between bosses and direct reportees. Similarly, respect for age and seniority consistently emerged as a characteristic of the Indian context (Gopalan & Stahl, 1998). We believe that designers of leader(ship) development programmes need to be aware of the need among participants to reconcile the dichotomy and find a meaningful synthesis between

Western theories and Indian insights and approaches for maximum effectiveness.

So far we have largely drawn upon global literature to understand the self-development aspect of leadership development. Ancient Indian texts and approaches constitute a treasure trove of rich insights into approaches and methods for self-development and self-transformation. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (Satchidananda, 1990), the concept of bhakti, karma, jnana, and raja yogas (Vivekananda & Nikhilananda, 1953) and Buddha’s Eight-fold Noble path (Bodhi, 1984) are some of the traditional ancient Indian approaches that have focussed on the philosophy and technology of self-development. The strength of the Indian approaches lies in their eclecticism and the plurality of approaches that are offered to individuals who seek personal development. Methods and techniques like asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi propounded in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (Saraswati & Saraswati, 2002; Satyananda Saraswati, 1989) are intended to facilitate self-transformation. The four paths (bhakti, karma, jnana, and raja yogas) described in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita (Swarupananda, 1998) are intended to help different individuals with different propensities choose paths that best suit them to achieve self-development and self-transformation. Yoga nidra, mantra japa, antar mauna (Saraswati, 1983), vipassana meditation (Goenka, 1997) and satipatthana (Goenka, 1999) are some of the other methods and approaches that might be able to pay rich dividends in the leader(ship) development process. Some Indian organizations have started to incorporate modules on yoga asanas, pranayama, dhyana, vipassana meditation and so on as part of their leadership development programmes. In addition, several Indian executives, including some CEOs, have on their own initiative, started practising yoga methods and meditational practices for their self-development.

As leadership development globally is confronted with challenges regarding self-transformation, there is a greater appreciation among leadership scholars and practitioners of traditional and ancient Indian approaches and an interest in examining their benefits and incorporating the approaches in a more systematic manner. The field of leader and leadership development in future is likely to be impacted significantly by combining in a discriminating manner the best of Western and Indian paradigms.

In the ensuing dialogue, an effort has been made to further elaborate and highlight the importance of the above issues.

Dialogue on leadership development

Leadership development programmes – some concerns

Manohar Reddy (MR): I have been a teacher of Organizational Behaviour for more than a quarter century and I have not been very comfortable with the outcomes of the learning for the participants in the programmes on leadership development. There seems to be a significant gap between the participants’ cognitive learning and what they actually internalize, in terms of deeper change in their

attitudes, feelings, and behaviour. You have been a teacher and a trainer for nearly two decades. What has been your experience?

Vasanthi Srinivasan (VS): My foray into the field of leadership and management development began in 1989 when I was working with Wipro. Wipro has historically had a very strong training and development focus. One such programme was for their hardware engineers, who were campus recruits. One of the components of the programme was a customer interaction skills workshop comprising role plays. Participants were provided with real life customer situations experienced by senior engineers and managers. The managers/senior engineers played the role of the customer, where they put on a tough customer act, and this was video recorded. These videos were replayed to the participants and debrief focussed on an analysis of how the issue could have been handled better from a customer service perspective. I noticed that there was an opportunity for some behavioural inputs which could enhance the process of self-awareness. During the debrief, many field engineers reflected on their behaviour at the work place for the first time. In a country where most engineers do not receive any training on behavioural aspects, this input was seen as a significant contribution to their personal growth. Three months later, during a training effectiveness exercise, the engineers found that this session had impacted them significantly in their personal and professional lives. I was not a trainer then, nor had I explored the field of training and development adequately. But one thing became clear at the end of the exercise – how you structure a leadership development intervention is likely to have a strong impact on the learning outcomes.

Subsequently, after I did the fellow programme in IIM Bangalore, I joined the P&P Group, a Bangalore based boutique consulting firm. It was here that I began to explore how individual differences in learning can be leveraged effectively and how different modes of training can be used for impacting outcomes. This has now become my lifetime journey in the field of leadership development.

Over the years, I have found that learning interventions have four levels of impact on people. At the first level, it is nothing more than an exposure to a new idea or concept. The second level is one of self-awareness – Oh! I have been doing this but I never thought about it this way. The third level is the willingness to confront one's weaknesses/vulnerabilities that have blocked performance in the past. And the final takeaway is about wanting to make the change happen, which goes well beyond the programme – I need to become a more inclusive person, not just professionally but personally. I have had participants being impacted on all these four levels by the development efforts.

MR: When I reflect on my 35-year journey in self-development, many things have changed in the way I viewed this issue. In the beginning, I was not really interested in human behaviour. I thought organizations could be more effective if there were no people. Then I realized that perhaps the issue was with me! I decided to learn about how to be more effective in dealing with people and that was the beginning of my journey. I read books; I even did a doctoral programme thinking that theories would help. I attended intensive growth labs and outbound programmes. I then journeyed into yoga and meditation. For many years I

thought, like a typical engineer, that I would attend a programme and I would be changed – just as raw material comes into a factory, undergoes some process, and out goes the finished product! After nearly a decade of attending self-development programmes and reading books, I came to the painful realization that I would have to change myself. The journey was difficult; I realized that it is not at all easy to change. Over the last 35 years I have taken a few steps and made some progress. Am I perfect today? No! But compared to what I was 35 years ago, I have progressed. I have taken a few steps in understanding myself, understanding others, and in my dealings with other people, I am better than what I was earlier.

Coming to my experience of designing and conducting leadership and management development programmes, what I observe is that there is a major cognitive component in many of our management development and leadership development programmes and depending upon how good a professor you are, people go away with an "aha!" feeling. But in most cases, participants do not internalize their learnings at a deeper level; there is hardly any change in their behaviour, thinking, or feeling patterns. This led me to ponder over what was happening and what could be done.

I was reminded of the story of Karna in the Mahabharata, of how he learnt his skills in archery from Parasurama. Karna was cursed by his own teacher that he would forget all that he had learnt when he needed it most. I see something similar happening in this case; people seem to know what kind of leader they should be, what they should be doing, but the moment they face a difficult situation, all that seems to be forgotten. My search for ways of getting out of this predicament has left me with many issues about the modes of helping people learn, grow, and change.

VS: I want to make a distinction between short term training and long term development. With regard to our short term programmes, my observations are identical to yours. The key difference between short duration and long duration programmes is that in the former, the focus is largely cognitive. When participants come to a business school, their focus is on taking away content and understanding the jargon. Therefore, we tend to focus on cognitive and knowledge related aspects. In a long duration programme, while we focus on the cognitive, we create opportunities for participants to engage at the level of beliefs and attitudes. We tend to cover the content and also focus on the processes that occur within their organization in strategy implementation. This allows them to observe and reflect on their experiences and bring them into the classroom. But in the long term development programmes, depending on the life experience of the participants, we are able to get the participants to explore deeper dimension of the "self". The time available is long enough for them to experiment with some change – however small it may be. Having said that, the cognitive dimension that we provide in the short term programmes often creates business impact very quickly. This acts as a positive reinforcement which in turn shapes self. I think, we need to go back and evaluate in a more systematic manner whether the pure cognitive inputs that are provided in the short term programmes have impacted individuals in becoming more effective leaders.

Leadership development versus leader development

MR: What is the distinction you draw between leader development and leadership development?

VS: In my experience, in most organizations leadership gets associated with position and designation. I am uncomfortable with that definition. In the present context, *I would define leadership as a process of influence* and this could happen at any level in the organization. This process of influence comes with a responsibility to create positive change within the context. This conceptualization is critical because in a globalized world which transcends boundaries we do not know who has to influence whom, when, and in which part of the world.

If leadership is a process of influence, I want to make a distinction, in the organizational context in particular, between leader influence and the collective influence of leaders. Let me illustrate this. We usually get a few senior managers in our programmes. They come here, learn things, go back and are often paralyzed because they cannot implement the things they have learnt here within their organizations. This is leader development. Leader development focusses on strengthening individual capacity and we have often ended up making a person a misfit in an organization where the person was a fit earlier because the organizational maturity to absorb such a leader has not changed. The organization believes that because this person went through the leader development programme he/she will come back and demonstrate leadership which will influence the collective. We also know of instances where a group of senior managers come together from an organization and work collectively to bring forth a mandate for change. In such cases, the leaders participate in shaping and crafting the organizational strategies, creating accountability structures, taking personal and collective responsibility vis a vis internal and external stakeholders to impact outcomes. No single individual on the leadership team possesses the capacity to make change happen; however, collectively they have the capability needed to make transformative change. This is leadership development.

Leadership literature does not make this distinction between leader development and leadership development explicitly. It is assumed that leadership is the quality of a leader. But in an organizational context where there are multiple leaders, how do you create collective leadership?

One development post the 2008 recession has been an obsessive focus on leader development especially in organizations that are downsizing. At such a time, investing in a leader development process does not enable. So, there is a place for organization development (OD), there is a place for leader development, and a place for collective leadership development. All the three kinds are becoming more and more critical when you are looking at organizational effectiveness.

The gap between knowing, doing, and being

MR: Coming back to the issue of understanding at the level of cognition, often it does not seem to result automatically

in desired changes in a person, in terms of attitudes, feelings and behaviour. I think the *knowing, doing, and being* framework fits very well in bringing out the gaps in the leader development process. Most of the theories of leadership that we have learnt seem to implicitly assume that if you “know” you can “do”, and you can “be”; therefore all that is necessary is “to know”. The assumption seems to be that if one has the required cognitive understanding, then one can “choose” to behave in appropriate ways. But in fact, often there seems to be a disconnect between “knowing”, “being”, and “doing”. How do we address this gap in bringing in transformation at the level of “being” and “doing”?

VS: The leadership development literature in the last decade is increasingly focussed on “doing”, “being”, and “knowing”. The challenging assignments and projects used in leadership development focus on the “doing” as a part of their development. “Doing” is action learning and that is changing the way people “know” and their “being” aspect.

The second methodology is mentoring. Mentoring comes from understanding the person’s “doing”: as a mentor I am able to see what the person is “doing”; I am also looking at how the person is “being” in that doing and then coming back to “knowing”. It is interesting that while the dominant paradigm seems to be “knowing, being, and doing”, the developmental methodologies used are “doing, being, and knowing”. In recent years, organizations have used the 70–20–10 rule: 70% comes from doing, 20% comes out of learning from others, and 10% comes from the classroom. I believe that this 70–20–10 is in the right direction because at the end of the day, all of leadership development happens at work.

I want to tie up two ideas that you have raised – personal change and the knowing-doing gap. My focus has largely been on role effectiveness of the individual in an organizational context and yours has been on personal change within or without a role in an organization. I find our differing leadership assumptions interesting – mine are with role and yours are with the person. In the context of leadership development from a role perspective, the 70–20–10 philosophy provides an opportunity to bring the person and the role together. But how would you interpret this when you are looking at individual and personal change?

MR: Ultimately all leadership, I believe, is about self-leadership – that is, each one of us has to learn to manage him/herself and become a better person at the level of thinking, feeling and action. If one can change him/herself at these deeper levels, then he/she will be effective as a manager, as a team player and as a leader. That is the emphasis I try to lay in the courses I teach.

In that context, a question arises regarding how this focus on cognitive understanding in the classroom can make someone effective at the “doing” and “being” level? There are several theories of leadership but there is very little focus on how to develop the requisite traits and characteristics.

This gap between “knowing”, “being”, and “doing” puzzled me – earlier I mentioned Karna’s curse, which depicts the gap between “knowing” and “doing”. That made me wonder about the cause for this gap, which in turn led me to enquire into how the brain works,

specifically how the brain functions in terms of decision-making. According to the literature on brain functioning, the neo-cortex is connected with the intellectual part – the rational, logical part; the mid brain is the centre associated with emotion, and the brain-stem is associated with the reflexive part, the autonomous system. The triune brain structure, with the reptilian, the mammalian, and the human aspects fits neatly with the way we make decisions and the way we behave. There are certain things which we do without thinking – we see a snake, we jump, then we realize it was a rope; first we jump and then we realize; so the sequence changes there. Similarly, if we develop love or hate for someone, this influences our judgement and decision-making. When we have time to think and when we are calm, the rational logical part from the neo-cortex comes into play. It appears that to an extent we are all hard-wired to act, think, and feel in certain ways when triggered by an external stimulus. All our cognitive learning in the classroom goes into the neo-cortex or the higher brain functioning but not into changing our feelings or reflexive actions at the level of mid-brain or brain-stem. I believe our understanding of change at the level of deeper layers of self in the context of business and management requires some deeper reflection.

Different approaches to leadership development

MR: Are there other methods that we can deploy to enable change and development at the feeling and behaviour level? I have been thinking about this in the context of the simulation exercises that we do in outbound training or in the classroom. Outbound training is more intense than the classroom exercises and people like Michael Useem of the Wharton School talk about climbing Mt. Everest or going on long treks to intensify the learning experience. Such exercises give a very deep personal insight about ourselves which, in my view is far more meaningful than questionnaire based understanding. Questionnaires also give insight but in a simulated or an intense real-life experience sometimes people have this “aha” experience – “Oh! is this what I am! Is this how I behave!” – or a much deeper understanding of themselves which they didn’t have earlier. However, one may still not be able to change because of the programming and the grooves formed in the mid-brain and the brain-stem – the deep programme or the etching may not change easily. So how does one change then? To me that is the crux and it looks as if the “doing” that you are talking about sometimes can bring changes at these other levels. The action-learning is probably the most important thing for internalizing at a deeper level rather than just cognitive understanding. As researchers like Warren Bennis state, this kind of learning happens when people go through crucible experiences and are pushed to stretch themselves beyond their zone of comfort. Critical major events in life, whether accidental or if one is deliberately pushed into them, would be very effective in my view in helping people to internalize change at a deeper level and in moving from “knowing” to “doing”.

VS: Two interesting thoughts occurred as I was listening to you. The neurophysiology field is evolving; there is a school of thought that believes that the brain is nothing more than an embedded system with synaptic connections that help to make linkages between very disparate sets of ideas. If we were to frame development from that perspective and allow that we may not be so hard-wired, and that the connections that happen in the brain are a continuous on-going process, then exposure to life experiences would automatically trigger more of those connections. So, it doesn’t seem to matter where we are coming from but it appears that more of “doing” is likely to automatically generate a set of experiences and the way those experiences are processed is the connection between doing and being. I am emphasizing this because from the perspective of reflection, there is, as Schön says, reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflection on action allows you to gain insights on your doing and being. But reflection in action – how do you process that? Only if I am able to do reflection *in* action after learning reflection *on* action can I lead effectively.

MR: Interesting that you used the word reflection. There is another word that is often used in Indian thought – awareness. I presume reflection in action that you are referring to implies a certain kind of thinking in the moment; there are others who say “just be aware, don’t think”. What is being suggested is to learn to be “aware in the moment”, in the “now”. This is the central focus of Eckhart Tolle’s “The Power of Now”. The same thing is referred to in the Eight-fold Noble path of the Buddha. This ties up with the issues you were talking about – reflection in action versus reflection on the action, after it is over.

The question that engages me is, how does one go about cultivating the awareness in the “now”? Only then does one become truly autonomous. If one is not aware in the “now”, one becomes a puppet of the internal programme; any amount of cognitive understanding or even insight is useless if one is not able to exercise choice based on one’s understanding “in the moment”.

VS: If you were to tie together reflection in action, that is, being aware of the here and now, and decision-making, what you would get at the end is an adaptive, inclusive, leader. Someone who is able to suspend judgment, who is able to see multiple perspectives, who has, through life experiences, acquired the capability to use the cognitive and affective aspects in a way that allows decision making that is in the now, long term focussed, and more holistic. I think there is a place for cognition; we cannot dismiss it, especially not in the corporate world.

Models of leadership development in practice

MR: We have been working on the Murugappa Group Leadership Development Programme for more than a decade and I think we have put to test some of the ideas that we have talked about. The three components which were part of the basic framework for the design of the programme were conceptual learning, reflective learning,

and action-learning. The great learning for me over the decade is that we have understood the practical aspects of this approach. I would like to listen to your experience of trying to put theory into practice.

VS: I have subsequently implemented the framework of conceptual, reflective, and action learning in several other organizations though the genesis of it was our work with the Murugappa Group. Today if an organization asks whether there is a return on investment (ROI) to leadership development, I can confidently say there is and that you can actually attach monetary numbers to it. How you structure action learning at the end of the conceptual learning and the reflective learning is the key to making the difference – What is the kind of behaviour you want to inspire? Is it innovation, is it risk taking, is it being able to create a new line of work? If organizations know what is the outcome they desire from their leadership development efforts, a good design can help them reach their goal. The assumption here is that top management values long term development of human capital; that reward structures reinforce and support performance driven efforts; that enough capacity exists within the business plans where opportunities are available for the individuals and the collective to demonstrate the desired behaviours.

I have also attempted different forms of structuring of leadership development efforts within the framework. In the case of the Murugappa Group itself, we anchored the process completely the first time but as we moved along, the organization acquired the capability to handle part of it and we facilitated that journey. Today we are at a stage where we need to work with multiple stakeholders to be able to make this kind of leadership development happen. As you said, there is a place for inventory and testing, there is a place for outbound learning, there is a place for personal growth, there is a place for individual development plans, and there is a place for 360 degree feedback. No single intervention can deliver the required outcomes on all of the desired competencies. So today leadership development is also about being able to harness the methodologies that are available to enhance the conceptual, reflective, and action learning. That is the paradigm which organizations need to shift into. Making change happen is no longer confined to the training department; it ought to be a multi stakeholder driven leadership development programme.

One of the questions that could come out of this is whether leadership development is expensive and is only for large organizations. I have used the same framework with smaller organizations and it is much easier to implement the framework there because there are fewer stakeholders and interests tend to be more aligned. In a small organization you can tone down the way the methodologies get delivered but at the end of it, the impact is the same.

MR: I would like to go back to an issue that you raised earlier. How does one help someone develop character or help them make a fundamental change? There is a widely held belief that character is something you develop largely in childhood. How easy is it to develop character in adulthood? We have a few examples from Indian mythology. We have the case of Valmiki who transformed from being a hunter and robber into a great sage. Of course there was a

process that he went through which was a combination of an “aha” experience and a subsequent practice – his recitation of the mantra “mara mara” or “Rama Rama” which led to his personal transformation over a period of time. A similar case in Buddhism is with Angulimala, a cruel killer who was transformed by the Buddha. He too went through a similar process. Mythology seems to suggest that there is a process for character change in adulthood. But these are rare exceptions, which are accomplished by great people. Can something meaningful be attempted on a larger scale with ordinary people? Or are we attempting the impossible?

VS: Every religion has a story of a sinner turning into a saint. From a philosophical perspective it seems to suggest that character can be changed. It is also interesting that during the leadership development programmes I can recall cases where people have come back after the 360 degree feedback and asked how the gap between what they perceive of themselves and what others perceive of them could be so drastic. In one case the 360 degree feedback was that the person was highly task oriented who was not likely to even experience the emotions that he evoked in the team. He refused to accept it saying that his team members and the organization were biased against him! But the interesting thing was when he spoke to his mother, she said I am willing to ignore all of those faults because you are my son and I live with you but the others do not have the same choice. He broke down when he narrated that and today, six years later, he has changed fundamentally from what he was earlier and is more effective at the workplace than before. Some events do trigger major reflection and it is important that we get honest, authentic feedback. I also believe that when you want to embark on personal change, the role of personal character is much bigger than what the organization can attempt.

Western and Indian approaches to leadership and leadership development

MR: There are Western models and traditional Indian models of personal change. I have been trying to decipher the principles underlying the Western and Eastern approaches to personal change, to try and understand the differences and synthesize them into a larger multi-pronged approach.

On personal change there are multiple models based on different assumptions. One approach is – you help reframe the thinking; how a person sees things is changed by helping him to reframe. That is one approach – cognitive behaviour therapy. The other one is the psychoanalytic process where the assumption seems to be that the unconscious pulls the strings and the conscious is just acting out. So all that one has to do is focus on making the unconscious “conscious” and then bring it under the control of the conscious mind. More recently, in the past few decades, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) has gained popularity. The assumption here seems to be all that matters is the “now”; your past is coded in all the five senses like a tape recorder or a video recorder – How you think, how you feel, how you behave is because of this recording in your brain. All that you have to do is re-write it, for which they have methods and tools.

Transactional analysis (TA) focusses significantly on cognitive understanding though it has other components too. The simplified version focusses on understanding oneself and once one has a cognitive understanding, one can “choose” to change. You find here dominance of the rational logical approach. These are some of the dominant Western approaches.

On the other hand, we have Indian approaches like yoga and meditation which are based on entirely different philosophical assumptions. They focus on understanding, observing, and transforming the “mind”. I am using the word “mind” differently from “thoughts”. In this context, the focus is on the way we think rather than on the content of the thoughts themselves. One has very little control over one’s thinking process; often thinking happens independent of one’s conscious control. There are tools, techniques, and methods in this system to help you gain mastery over your mind. This is one approach.

There are other deeper meditational techniques, which possibly help a person dig out things from the unconscious, not in the psychoanalytic way but by being aware in a detached way and just letting these thoughts be, without getting hooked to them. You create a vacuum at the conscious level by focussing on your breath and the muck from the unconscious surfaces and you let it go and just be a witness or *sakshi* – this is what is meant by “being aware in the moment”. One is rarely able to be a witness; often one ends up becoming the “actor”. The focus is on cultivating the capacity to be a witness, which can transform a person over an extended period of time. There are other techniques, such as the recitation of mantras, “bhakti”, “karma”, “jnana” yogas and other methods.

Another question that occupies me is, how does one cultivate feelings? Each one of us has a structure of feelings; there are certain types of feelings that dominate us frequently. How do we transform our feeling structures? There are certain methods and tools and techniques, which give hints regarding cultivation of desired feelings. In Buddhism there is *metta* (in Pali) meditation or *mythri bhava* (in Sanskrit), which encourages a person to cultivate feelings of goodness and friendship towards one and all through visualization. The principle seems to be that if one keeps visualizing every day, over many days, weeks, and months, one changes and inculcates those visualized feelings in oneself. Neuro-linguistic programming uses a similar technique – they use the power of visualization, which they have framed in a modern paradigm. I have found these tools and techniques useful to a certain degree. I find merit in both the Western and the Indian systems and methods and I try and synthesize both these approaches.

VS: Scholars have spoken about the Indian capability to hybridize things which appear to be seemingly irreconcilable. Indian management is able to combine Western assumptions, methods, and tools with Indian ways of execution. However, given our long history, our social inequalities and our diversities, we need to identify ways of institutionalizing the processes and make them enduring.

Further, in the last few decades of rapid growth, organizations have hired employees from cities and small towns where the rate of change in terms of infrastructure, education, health access and so on have not been uniform; so, we have the co-existence of multiple India’s. In this

context, I have misgivings about the one size fits all approach to leadership development. How do we retain this diversity of offerings from different traditions and yet synthesize and build coherence in terms of the larger framework? That is the challenge for Indian organizations.

Leadership theories and their fit with different approaches to leadership development

MR: You were talking about different leadership development approaches being a fit with different leadership theories. Would you like to say a little more on this issue?

VS: Every leadership theory is a product of its time and is underlined with a set of assumptions. When organizations articulate the expectations from a leadership development programme, they are also explicating their own assumptions of leadership. When key decision makers in an organization tell me that it is very difficult to train people once they are 40 years old, and if this is the dominant belief in the organization, they are drawing on the trait theory. The assumption is that leadership qualities are primarily traits that an individual possesses and it is difficult to alter them fundamentally. When organizations operate from this perspective, I tell them to invest heavily in the selection of participants for the leadership development programme. From the perspective of behavioural theories, it is believed that certain leadership behaviours are more effective and can be imparted through training. The dominant focus is on demonstrated behaviours and the role of incentives, rewards and recognitions for sustained leadership behaviours. Coming to situational leadership as an approach the assumption is that the situation and the follower’s readiness are likely to contribute to the effectiveness of the leader. Any leadership development that is based on this approach, will need to provide varied and different opportunities/followers for a leader to demonstrate his/her effectiveness. I have difficulty with that approach because unless we can create varied opportunities which allow people to demonstrate different styles, how do they internalize the learning? Does this mean that simulation and vicarious learning contexts would be the most effective ways of development? And even more difficult, can we actually program all of life’s situations? The leader-follower theory would lead us in the direction of mentoring and coaching.

MR: There seems to be a difference between the mentoring and coaching paradigms of the West and of India. The Western approach seems to operate on the premise that you are an adult and I am an adult – I will only be a facilitator; I will be a mirror and help reflect things for you. After that it is your choice – whether or not you want to work on the issues that you need to address is up to you. In fact, transactional analysis is explicit about the contractuality between the therapist and client.

The Indian view on the other hand, in terms of teacher and student/disciple, is not about treating each disciple as an adult who makes his own autonomous choice. There seems to be recognition that there are times when the student may freeze and be terrified to cross some threshold. So there are times when the teacher has to encourage, sometimes nudge, sometimes push the student

so that the student crosses over the threshold. This approach is very different from the adult choice approach; it is a different paradigm. Do you think the “*guru-shishya*” model of mentoring and coaching would be more appropriate than the adult-to-adult model of the West, given the Indian context?

VS: Mentoring is probably the most contested leadership development process today. There are questions right from the choice of the mentor to whether the mentor should be chosen by the mentee or not. The *guru-shishya* model assumes that the guru is all knowing. Wherever mentoring has been adopted with a dominant *guru-shishya* focus or at least an “older, wise –younger, willing to learn” combination, mentoring has worked very well in Indian organizations. Yet, a large part of the dominant training on mentoring focusses on the adult to adult relationship. A lot of mentors are uncomfortable when the mentees come and ask them what they should do. So, by placing this model in the adult to adult discussion when several people continue to remain in the “older, wise younger, learning” mode even at much later stages of their life, it becomes very difficult to carry it through within an organization. For this model to work there are two important assumptions. One, that the *shishya* sees the guru as someone who is truly wise; second, care has to be exercised in the choice of gurus who are credible.

MR: It appears that the Indian tradition and other Eastern traditions focus more on “being” rather than on “doing” or “knowing” in terms of the desired goal. The focus is on the transformation of the person inside, not necessarily on how he “acts” and what he “knows”. The Upanishads and the Buddhist and Jaina texts focus on how one transforms the “being” aspect, in that if you know who you truly are, you will be liberated. Since one’s lack of knowledge comes from “*avidya*” or ignorance, if you get an insight into the true nature of your being, you are liberated. That is at the level of the concept; but at the level of practice, as with Valmiki and Angulimala, there are tools and techniques to purify the “being”, such as meditational practices – mantra japa, or the traditional Indian systems that are aimed at purifying the mind – the “*chitta*”; “*chitta suddhi*” translates literally into cleansing of the mind stuff. Unlike psychoanalysis with its focus on understanding the unconscious, these schools say there is nothing to understand, this is all muck, just let it go, dredge it from the bottom. You have to create the conditions for dredging up the muck from the bottom. While neuro-linguistic programming talks about reprogramming oneself, techniques such as meditation and “yoga nidra” talk about deprogramming oneself. They aver that “your true nature is to be free”; so all that has to be done is to “de-program one’s conditioning”, overcome “the false understanding”. These are deep assumptions and world-views about how we go about this process that are very different from the Western world-views and assumptions.

I believe that there is a lot that ancient Indian philosophies and approaches can bring to the leadership development process. They can also provide a sound philosophical foundation for issues like sustainability and environmental awareness. Indian ethos can form the basis at a philosophical level for sustainability since it has its core in the belief that we are all manifestations of a single

entity, the *Brahman*. This philosophical outlook possibly can be the greatest contribution today in terms of helping people see why they need to worry about environment sustainability and the long term. Your views?

VS: There are different levels of understanding on being a leader and that is a continuum from completely unaware to highly self-aware in the moment. A fusion of the two systems will allow individuals to move from the unaware to the aware. In the unaware to aware space, the Western tradition has a strong role, much stronger than they do at a higher level of consciousness. If we look at the executives who come to our programmes, I see something very interesting. Typically you have about 20–25% who are completely unaware; about 5–7% at the stage of being really aware; and a large number in the middle. There are people today in the management field who just want to be effective in their roles. To them the existing methodologies work to make them efficient. Then there are people who go beyond their role and ask about the personal change that they are willing to make if it makes them effective. To me, this discussion is about the adaptation that is needed to be able to act for the future and that is where a lot of Indian traditions play a very significant role.

MR: We find that today’s Indian executives are caught between tradition and modernity. The managerial class is largely educated in the Western paradigm but their conditioning at the deeper level or the “*sanskara*” is traditional Indian. It looks to me there are many people trying to synthesize *that* and *this* and make a coherent whole out of them rather than have two different pieces which form separate water-tight compartments. We, as academics, do not seem to be doing anything to help them arrive at a coherent way of combining these two into an integral whole. In our programmes we teach predominantly the Western theories and frameworks and if they are not happy with it, or for some other reason, then they approach “swamijis and gurus” for the Eastern component. There are few places where these two components are meaningfully synthesized and that to me is our major failing as teachers and trainers in Indian institutions. This is a felt need that Indian managers have and we have not addressed this issue meaningfully.

VS: I would also agree with you. But one of India’s strengths, that has often been acknowledged in the literature, is our capacity to adapt. However, if this adaptation should happen then I would argue that there is a fundamental requirement for us to understand the traditions that exist.

MR: Yes, unless we synthesize it in ourselves, we are not going to help anyone else synthesize.

We ourselves are struggling with these water-tight compartments; we have our professional life and our family life where we practice our traditions, and these two facets are kept separate. Even among us as teachers and trainers, I think that is the struggle – how do we develop this synthesis between Western theories and our own Indian traditions and upbringing, first for ourselves and then to help others.

VS: There is another element in this. There are a lot of things Indian which have come to be treated as esoteric. For instance, yoga is not seen as integral to the way we are structured, but as an add-on. That is another challenge we

face in terms of being able to mainstream several of our traditions meaningfully into a business goal environment or leadership development.

MR: I teach a course on Indian philosophy and self-transformation and questions on what is “Indian” (when Indians belong to different denominations) have been asked in my classes. What I communicate in the course is that I am not teaching religion but the inner process – some people call it spirituality. I would say that I don’t distinguish between spirituality and personal growth. What is being called spirituality is the liberation of self or the transformation of self. In a different context, people have developed these methods and approaches, tools and techniques, which help people to free themselves from their conditioning. I would like to take insights from these approaches and put them to use.

I have been teaching this course for more than a decade and I try to synthesize the essence of these approaches and present it as a method, as tools for self-development and enhancing personal effectiveness, rather than as a vehicle for attaining mukti or moksha. But the outcome is the same – it is deprogramming one’s conditioning. The aim is to become free of one’s conditioning.

Occasionally some concerns are expressed, but I make it clear that these methods are aimed at freeing oneself and not about relying on some outside external authority; if you practice these methods well, you gain greater autonomy; that is what I tell them.

Personal journey: lessons learned and insights gained

MR: In conclusion, what are some of the significant insights you have gained over the last few decades of being a teacher and trainer of leadership development?

VS: The first and most important one is – the heart of leader development is facilitation. If you are engaged in leader development, how good a facilitator you are will determine the effectiveness of the participant. How do you move from being a teacher to actually being a facilitator? That is a very big shift in terms of leader development.

Second, when decision makers in organizations view leadership development and the investments that they are going to make in it, it is very important for them to make the distinction between leader development, leadership development, and organization development. It is important for them to see the interrelationship and interdependencies between these three if they need to have effective and sustainable organizations.

Third, we know based on the work that we have done that there is a return on investment in leadership development. How do I visualize this ROI from outcomes that are behavioural and not just financial? That is another area where more work has to be done. When organizations ask us to help build leadership development what is it that they want built, what is the nature of personal change that they want to effect which will impact role change?

Next, leadership development needs to be a bouquet of offerings but yet cohesive. How do you string the offerings together – perhaps the metaphor of garland is better. How do we string the different coloured flowers together in a

way that they are not just a bunch of flowers and that is the challenge particularly in the context of different traditions. How do we cohesively different traditions meaningfully and offer something that is impactful for different types of people and organizations?

Finally leadership development in the future needs to be customized personal development. The generic component will be the cognitive aspect and the customization will have to be done based on participant needs, maturity, and aspiration.

MR: I gained a few valuable insights based on my experience and my own personal journey. I am of the view that conceptual learning is the easier part of teaching/learning. Reflection and insight are more difficult but still possible; there are methods for this and it is possible to a certain degree to help people gain deeper insight about themselves and reflect upon these insights. But internalization in terms of change in the deeper programming – changing attitudes, feelings and behaviour – is the more difficult part. Often, when people say we are doing leadership development, they are unclear about what they are attempting. Implicitly, they may be looking for change at the deeper level but they only focus on imparting concepts and theories in the classroom and they are disappointed when the outcomes are not what they expected.

It is important to carefully think through the goal, the objective of leadership development one has in mind; if it is a deeper transformation that is being sought, one must ask whether the methods and approaches which one is deploying will facilitate such a transformation; a deeper examination of the assumptions of leadership development is necessary. Designers of leadership development interventions have to have a coherent model. If it is the deeper transformation along the lines we discussed, then action-learning/learning by doing, mentoring and coaching, are likely to be more effective. But this requires organizational support, and a longer term commitment. It cannot be accomplished in a short three or five day class-room based programme. In short duration leadership development programmes, cognitive understanding can happen; strategic thinking, multi-disciplinary perspective, and so on can be learnt more easily. But changing behaviour is more difficult, changing emotional structures or character is even more difficult; these are very long, difficult journeys to undertake.

Group learning methods, modelled on techniques like group-therapy can be very effective in deeper transformation and internalization. However, here too a short duration programme is not enough – you must have a support group of people who are pursuing a similar journey, or a support buddy, who meet regularly and spend time and ask questions such as what was your plan, what have you done, how did you succeed, and so on. If there is a facilitator it is even better. But a support group and continuing effort and hand holding is very important for deeper internalization.

The other point is, there is a lot more in our Indian tradition that can help people in accomplishing their long-term development and change. Most of these tools, techniques and methods will not show any effect in a day or two; but if one practises them for months and years, then the effects will be palpable. Over years one can change significantly; but it is an individual’s call to undertake that journey.

These are some of the important insights which I would like to share based on my personal journey and my own

experiences as a teacher and trainer in the field of management and leadership development.

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