

SELF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: THE LINK BETWEEN BODY, MIND, AND REFLECTION

Ute Tat
Management Center Innsbruck, Austria
ute.tat@mci.edu

Natascha Zeitel-Bank
Management Center Innsbruck, Austria
natascha.zeitel-bank@mci.edu

Abstract:

Based on self-leadership theory, experiential learning theory and considering current findings from neuroscience, this paper focuses on the physical and cognitive perspective of learning and intends to analyze the relationship between body, mind, and reflection in order to develop selected self-leadership competencies.

It aims to provide an insight whether physical experience and awareness combined with intellectual reflection can bring potential changes in the self-assessment of self-leadership competencies in a way that it blends in with current theory.

Based on the assumption, that leadership competencies can hardly be developed simply by theoretical input and learning is a process of real experience, reflective observation, forming abstract concepts and testing in new situations (Kolb's experiential learning theory, 1984), an innovative approach to develop and strengthen selected self-leadership competences for a sustainable success has been designed.

The learning method comprises physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection. Therefore, the students of the master's program "International Health & Social Management" at the MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Austria, participated and experienced these aspects in a two semester long learning process on self-leadership.

It can be shown that there is a need for new ways in the development of self-leadership competencies, in terms of understanding the relationship between learning, physical experience and awareness developing selected self-leadership competences (e.g. self-awareness, self-control, self-motivation, constructive thought patterns, concentration and relaxation) through physical experience and awareness combined with intellectual reflection.

Keywords: leadership development, self-leadership, experiential learning, awareness, embodiment

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on self-leadership theory, experiential learning theory and considering current findings from neuroscience, this paper focuses on the physical and cognitive perspective of learning and intends to analyze the relationship between body, mind, and reflection in order to develop selected self-leadership competencies.

Self-leadership is a timely and important topic in today's complex and dynamic work environment, especially when it comes down to the question of how to prepare people for leading positions or how to develop and strengthen self-leadership skills, cognitions and behaviors to lead oneself. Therefore, an important component of self-leadership development is to enable leaders to successfully face the current challenges by strengthening selected self-leadership competencies. We examine this critical issue by integrating physical experience, self-leadership and experiential theory. Specifically, we argue that selected self-leadership competencies could be developed and strengthened through physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection. Moreover, we postulate that these competencies could play a crucial role in the personal development of individuals, which can be understood as a process of growing to maturity, gaining the cognitive, social and emotional competencies required to manage working life and thus serve as prerequisites for leading positions.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce self-leadership and experiential theory, as well as a detailed look at the link between body and mind in self-leadership development. Finally, we will discuss the innovative approach to develop and strengthen selected self-leadership competencies for a sustainable effect. Through an empirical approach, students of the Master program "International Health & Social Management" at the Management Center Innsbruck, Austria, experienced these aspects in a specific lecture combining theory with physical training.

2. THE MODEL OF SELF-LEADERSHIP

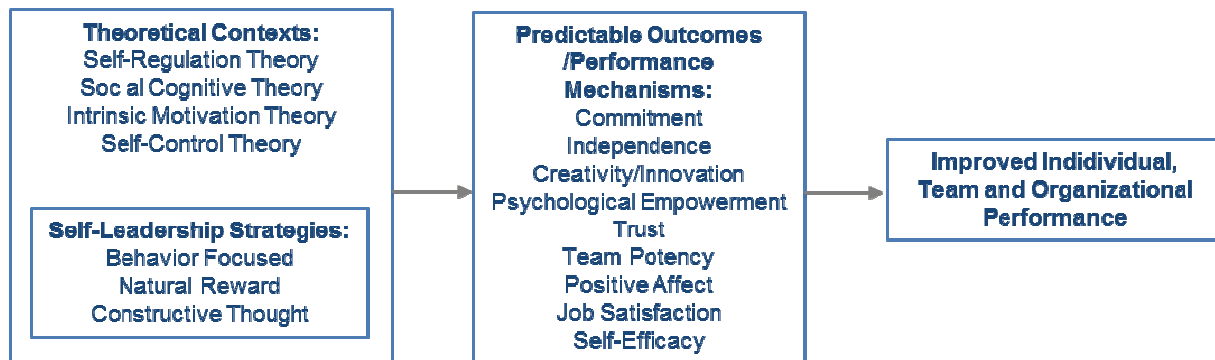
Self-leadership focuses on the process of self-influencing through which individuals control their own behavior, influencing and leading themselves to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform (Manz, 1986; Manz & Neck, 2004, as cited in Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.271). Thus self-leadership combines behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies, designed to positively influence personal effectiveness (Manz & Neck 2004, Manz & Sims 2001, Prussia et al., 1998, as cited Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.271). Self-leadership strategies may enhance personal effectiveness in a number of ways:

For instance behavior-focused strategies mainly focus on the self-awareness for one's own actions, and include self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, and self-cueing (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.271). A Study on self-leadership in an organizational setting suggested that those leaders, who facilitate self-observation, self-goal setting and self-reward, are the most effective one's (Manz & Sims, 1987, as cited Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.273). Further research suggests that the behavior-focused strategy of self-observation can lead to increased self-awareness and increased self-focus, which in turn can promote increases in task focus and ultimately in task performance (e.g. Carver, 1975; Wicklund & Duval, 1971, as cited in Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.277). Natural reward strategies are related to intrinsic motivation, and encompass two primary strategies: the first enhances a given task with more pleasant and enjoyable features, whereas the second shapes perceptions by focusing attention away from unpleasant aspects of a task to inherently rewarding one's (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.272). Naturally rewarding activities tend to make us feel more competent and more self-controlling (Deci 1975; Deci & Ryan 1980, as cited in Neck & Manz 2013, p.44), and furthermore provide us with a sense of purpose (Neck & Manz 2013, p.43). Constructive thought pattern stresses the positive influence of habitual thinking pattern, and include identifying and replacing dysfunctional beliefs, mental imagery, and positive self-talk (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.272). The results of a study on self-leadership's constructive thought pattern strategies suggested that individuals who participated in thought self-leadership training experienced increased mental performance, enthusiasm, job satisfaction and decreased nervousness (Neck & Manz, 1996, as cited Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.273).

According to Neck & Houghton (2006), self-leadership can be seen as "a normative model of self-influence that operates within the framework of more descriptive and deductive theories such as self-regulation and social cognitive theory" (p.270). The application of self-leadership strategies may result

in a number of predictable outcomes, which in turn may lead to increased performance. These suggested relationships are illustrated in figure 1 (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.285).

Figure 1: Model of self-leadership contexts and performance mechanisms



Source: Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.285

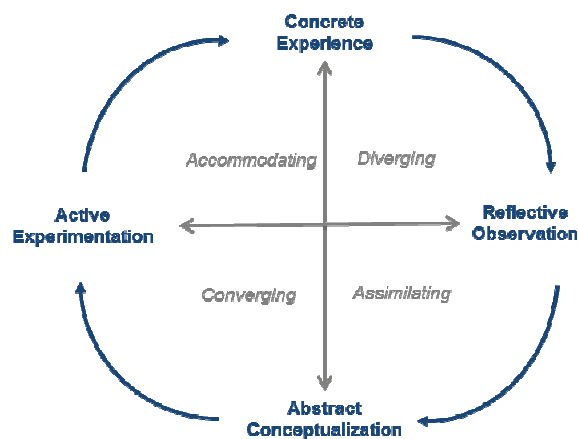
In summary, self-leadership can be described as a self-imposed influence process that primarily aims to support individuals to deal effectively with this complex world and to lead to fulfillment in life (Neck & Manz 2013, p.1-2). Practicing self-leadership strategies (e.g. self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, self-cueing, task enhancement, shaping perceptions, beliefs, mental imagery and self-talk) can contribute to a number of predictable outcomes and ultimately lead to enhanced performance as illustrated in figure 1 (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.271, 285). Self-leadership implies personal growth and maturation and is about effectively leading oneself as individual, as member of a team or as leader of others. “In fact, if we ever hope to be effective leaders of others, we need first to be able to lead ourselves effectively” (Neck & Manz 2013, p.1).

3. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Experiential learning theory offers the foundation for an approach to adult education and learning as a lifelong process, and is based on research in social psychology, philosophy, and cognitive psychology. The model links education, work, and personal development with emphasizing the relationships that can be developed between the classroom and the environment of individuals with experiential learning methods (Kolb, 1984, p. 3-4).

Based on the intellectual origins in the work of Lewin, Dewey and Piaget, the educational theorist David Kolb stresses the central role that experience plays in the learning process. By means of his experiential learning theory he suggests “a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior” (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). According to Joy and Kolb (2009) the experiential learning theory presents a cyclical model of learning, consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Figure 2 illustrates the four-stage learning cycle. It shows how experience is translated through reflection into concepts, which are used as guides for active experimentation. In the first stage (“CE”) the learner actively experiences an activity. In the second stage (“RO”) the learner consciously reflects back on that experience. In the third stage (“AC”) the learner attempts to conceptualize a theory or model of what is observed. In the fourth stage (“AE”) the learner is trying to plan how to test a model or theory or plan for a new experience (Learning Theories Knowledge Base, n.d.).

Figure 2: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle



Source: Joy & Kolb (2009, p.71)

Referring to Joy and Kolb (2009) within this idealized learning cycle the learner gets in touch with all stages – experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting - in a recursive process corresponding to the learning situation and the subject matter. Because of individual-related socialization, it is not necessary to start the learning cycle in the same mode. Based on individual differences and preferences for learning, four basic learning styles – Diverging, Assimilating, Converging and Accommodating, - are identified, which in turn correspond to the above described stages. “Diverging learners prefer to learn through reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, Assimilating types rely on abstract conceptualization and active experimentation and Accommodating types use active experimentation and concrete experience” (Joy & Kolb, 2009, p.71). The styles highlight conditions under which learners learn better. According to this *divergers* learn better when allowed to observe and collect a wide range of information, *assimilators* learn better when presented with sound logical theories to consider, *convergers* learn better when provided with practical applications of concepts and theories, and *accommodators* learn better when provided with “hands-on” experiences (Learning Theories Knowledge Base, n.d.). Because people have individual differences and preferences for learning and do learn from their experience, the integration of experience, observation, concepts and action into a holistic lifelong learning process makes sense.

For the field of higher education a growing group of educators see experiential education as a way to revitalize the university curriculum and to cope with many of the changes facing adult education today. For adult students, learning methods that combine study and work, theory and practice provide a more productive arena for learning (Kolb, 1984, pp. 4-6).

To summarize, from the experiential perspective learning is conceived as a continuous process, as opposed to content or outcomes, and grounded in experience. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between opposing ways of dealing with the world. It is a holistic, adaptive process comprising integrated human functioning such as thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment and thus can be seen as a lifelong process of creating knowledge, an active, self-directed process that can be applied in everyday life (Kolb, 1984, pp. 26-36). In that sense “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.38).

4. LINKING BODY, MIND AND REFLECTION: LEARNING METHOD AND RESEARCH PROPOSITION

Whereas the role of the body plays in cognition was widely neglected from early cognitive science, recent research emphasis on the idea of embodiment and shows the reciprocity between organism and environment, and the relation between mind and body (Hirose 2001, p.289). Body and mind is the primary concern of self-leadership too. Self-leadership strategies as well as external environment do have an impact on individual behaviors and thoughts (Neck & Manz 2013, p.121). The complex and

often stressful work environment of contemporary organizations goes along with excessive demands and low job control. There is evidence that chronic, unmanaged high job demands result in exhaustion and ultimately in job burnout (e.g. Lovelace, 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, as cited in Lovelace & Manz & Alves, 2007, p.375). Thus an important part of self-leadership development should be to address these stressful situations by providing possibilities for positively dealing with them. We posit that self-leadership development can utilize the principles of physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection for strengthening several self-leadership competencies. Competencies at this point are seen as a combination of skills, cognitions and behaviors, whereas the process of competency development is understood as a lifelong learning process of doing and reflecting.

In the following we present our learning method that integrates behavior focused, natural reward and constructive thought strategies of self-leadership (e.g. self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, self-cueing, task enhancement, shaping perceptions, beliefs, mental imagery and self-talk), and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning approach (experience, observation, conceptualization and experimentation). At the stage of "concrete experience" people start with concrete physical experience. They practice special physical exercises, aimed to develop the following self-leadership competencies: concentration, self-awareness, self-discipline, creating positive thought pattern, flexibility and balance, empathy, communication, and relaxation (see table 1). At this stage they strongly focus on *experiencing*. At the stage of "reflective observation" people observe themselves, as well as others, from a helicopter perspective and reflect on behaviors and thoughts. Based on this process of conscious they are hence able to analyze and assess existing thought patterns and behaviors due to possible causes including internal and external factors. Within that stage people emphasize on *reflecting*. Build on the previously assessment of behaviors and thoughts due to desirability or undesirability, at the stage of "thinking" people might create new patterns of thoughts and behaviors through shaping perceptions and adopting behaviors including rewards. Thus they strongly focus on *creating* concepts used as guide for future. At the stage of "active experimentation" people test their abstract concepts as designed in the former stage in new situations and might react accordingly to new thought patterns. This stage focuses on *acting*. People run through the cycle several times and get in touch with all stages in a recursive process corresponding to their individual characteristics, the subject matter and the situation, whereupon the stages might overlap in time.

In summary, we assume that people are more likely to develop self-leadership competencies when they undergo a real experience on a physical level over a certain period of time. Specifically, we assert the following proposition: *Individuals are able to develop selected self-leadership competencies through physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection.* Taking into consideration both the concept of self-leadership and the experiential learning approach against the background of our proposition the main challenge is the following: How could this learning method be integrated into the process of developing self-leadership competencies on a practical basis?

5. DEVELOPING SELF-LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES: PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Based on the assumption, that self-leadership competencies can hardly be developed simply by formal education (i.e. theoretical input) and learning is a process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Kolb's experiential learning theory, 1984), an innovative approach to develop and strengthen selected self-leadership competencies for a sustainable success has been designed. The learning method comprises physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection. Therefore, the students of the master's program "International Health & Social Management" at the MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Austria, participated and experienced these aspects in a two semester long learning process on self-leadership. The course is designed for a weekly morning unit of one and a half hour and emphasizes predominantly physical experience. Each unit comprises a part with physical exercises (i.e. body work) and a part focusing on intellectual reflection. The overall course objective is to develop and strengthen the following self-leadership competencies.

Table 1: Description of the selected self-leadership competencies

Competencies	Description
Concentration	Students practice to be centered in the moment they are presently in
	Keeping the mind concentrated throughout the exercises and listening

	concentrated to and following faithfully the instructions increases the ability to concentrate under stressful, dynamic circumstances
	A special breathing technique supports concentrating on a strong centered mind
	Practicing the exercises stands for concentrating on mind control via body control
Self-awareness	Active listening is one of the most important skills of a leader. Self-awareness in this sense means listening to one's inner self (i.e. self-focus)
	Students practice to listen inside their body to better understand their own needs and emotions as well as accepting their own restrictions
	An increased sensitivity to trust oneself might help to trust in own decisions
Self-discipline	Students need to overcome their inner resistance because they are not used to learn that way
	Doing the exercises regularly is quite an effort and requires patience and persistence
	Students are inspired to integrate the learning outcomes into their daily life
Creating positive thought pattern	Engaging in positive thought while doing the exercises enables students to transfer this ability to work and its accomplishment
	Positive self-talk as internal communication assists the decision-making process and creates a "can-do" belief
	Students increase their ability to mentally practice a task and imagine successfully how to perform it beforehand
Flexibility and balance	The practiced exercises enable students to become more flexible in terms of body and mind
	In doing inconvenient exercises students need to overcome inner temptations and thus students have to leave their comfort zone
	In this sense flexibility means to be open to new ways of thinking which might help students to be better prepared for new challenges
	The course supports the mental and physical strength and well being of the students and supports to better find and keep the balance of body and mind
Empathy	A better understanding of own needs, emotions and restrictions might lead to a better understanding of the needs, emotions and restrictions of others
	People might be well trained in active listening to a conversation but in this course they furthermore increase their ability to observe nonverbal communication
Communication	Due to the structure of the course, students practice both: non-verbal communication in terms of body language and verbal communication
	Through practicing the exercises students increase their sensitivity in terms of non-verbal communication
	The verbal communication part supports the class at the beginning with the formation of the group and afterwards with the performance of the group
	It enables students to become more familiar with each other and to increase their group cohesiveness
Relaxation	No doubt that it is of great importance for a leader to be able to recuperate in order to gain new energy for new challenges
	Therefore students practice to manage their own (limited) resources to prevent burn out
	They experience the difference between activation and relaxation
	Focusing on breathing enables the students to calm their mind and spirit

At the end of the two semester long learning process we suppose the participants will have acquired hands-on experience in self-leadership. In particular they should be able to

- be aware of self-discipline issues in their daily work life
- increase their willingness to overcome inner restrictions
- stay concentrated (i.e. self-focused) even under tough conditions
- be aware of their own emotions, needs and restrictions (i.e. self-awareness)
- aware of the emotions, needs and restrictions of others (i.e. empathy)
- understand the meaning of an entire whole of mind and body
- calm down and relax consciously
- apply selected self-leadership competencies in their daily work life to prevent from stress and keep a needful work-life-balance
- be aware of the importance of non-verbal communication
- create positive thought patterns
- reflect on body and mind control

Furthermore, we suppose that practicing these self-leadership competencies will contribute to the participants' self-efficacy, motivation, and finally performance.

6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of our research is to contribute to the current self-leadership discussion by offering an innovative approach to develop and strengthen selected self-leadership competencies. To achieve this objective we integrated the model of self-leadership and experiential theory and introduced a learning method that emphasizes on physical experience. We proposed that individuals are able to develop selected self-leadership competencies through physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection.

With regard to our findings from self-leadership courses based on the above described learning method over the last three years we can state that there is a need for new ways in the development of self-leadership competencies, in terms of both understanding the relationship between learning, physical experience and awareness, and developing selected self-leadership competencies (e.g. self-awareness, self-control, self-motivation, constructive thought patterns, concentration and relaxation) through physical experience and awareness along with intellectual reflection. In particular our research shows that there is a broad scope of acceptance and refusal for this kind of learning method. Indeed, it highly polarizes in terms of acceptance due to individual differences and preferences for learning and different learning types. Moreover, there is evidence that individual characteristics in general (e.g. personality, culture, gender and age) as well as external factors might have an impact on the learning outcome.

This goes along with current trends in self-leadership research include intercultural issues, contingency factors, health and fitness, and shared leadership. Thus future research effort could be to focus on these aspects (Neck & Houghton, 2006, p.286). In particular, further empirical research on the role of physical experience in developing self-leadership competencies would provide additional, valuable information about the relationship between these issues.

REFERENCES

1. Hirose, N. (2002). An ecological approach to embodiment and cognition. *Cognitive Systems Research*, 3, 289-299.
2. Joy, S., & Kolb, D.A. (2009). Are there cultural differences in learning style? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33, 69-85.
3. Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
4. Learning-Theories Knowledge Base. (n.d.). (2013). Experiential Learning (Kolb). Retrieved from <http://www.learning-theories.com/experiential-learning-kolb.html>
5. Lovelace, K.J., & Manz, C.C., & Alves, J.C. (2007). Work stress and leadership development: The role of self-leadership, shared leadership, physical fitness and flow in managing demands and increasing job control. *Human Resource Management Review*, 17, 374-387.
6. Neck C.P., & Houghton J.D. (2006). Two decades of self-leadership theory and research. Past developments, present trends and future possibilities. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(4), 270-295.
7. Neck C.P., & Manz C.C. (2013). *Mastering Self-Leadership. Empowering Yourself for Personal Excellence*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education.