Chapter 51

LEADER.edu: Using Interactive Scenario-Based Simulations for Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

Leadership and leadership development have become increasingly frequent topics of discussion in popular, professional, and academic discourse. There is little doubt about the importance of leadership, or leadership development, but there are a number of conceptual and operational issues associated with each. Adding to the challenge is that judgments about the appropriateness of particular methods for leadership development should be reflective of one’s view of the nature of leadership. Simulations and games offer a compelling approach to leadership development, especially because they can be designed to address many dimensions of leadership and to integrate the benefits of other available instructional approaches. Internally-parametered simulation games are particularly well suited for this purpose, and communication and Information Technology, from the simplest to the highly complex, can be extremely useful in supporting this type of simulation. LEADER.edu™, a scenario-based, internally-parametered
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simulation designed to engage participants in strategic leadership learning experiences using a combination of online access and interactive dialogue and feedback, provides an illustration of this capability. The use of customized scenarios, multiple iterations, conditions emerging from participant activity, and structured reflective learning and debriefing as a part of the activity—all making use of computer-mediated technology—has the potential to provide a robust learning experience, but not without considerable engagement by the designer/facilitator.

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership and leadership development have become increasingly frequent topics of discussion in popular, professional and academic discourse. Interest in these issues reflects what appears to be a broadly shared and growing sense of the importance of leadership in all facets of social and professional life, and of the value—if not the necessity—of expanding our knowledge on how to cultivate leadership talent and capacity.

While discussions of leadership are often situated in specific settings—politics, business, education or sports, to mention four of the most common—professional and scholarly interest in the applications of these ideas transcends contexts, sectors and disciplines.

The breadth of consideration given to leadership and leadership development is a mixed blessing in some respects. The attention to these subjects attests to their importance and relevance to contemporary life, and the multiple conceptualizations add richness and diversity. With the richness and diversity, however, comes complexity, ambiguity and contradiction. Somewhat ironically, the popularity and variety of perspectives make it difficult to be clear on what leadership is and how effective leadership should be defined, and answers to both questions are prerequisites to the design and implementation of meaningful leadership development initiatives.

Even a cursory review of writings from a cross-section of the literature reveals any number of differing views as to what leadership is (Ruben, 2006). Leadership is variously defined as: “collaborating and encouraging the pursuit of mutually beneficial purposes” (Hackman & Johnson, 2000, p. 12); “attracting people and making things happen” (Maxwell 1999, p. ix); “building community” (DePree, 1999, p. 16); “the ability to inspire and stimulate others to achieve worthwhile goals” (DuBrin, 2004, p. 3); encouraging “change in order to meet the needs or to reach the goals of a group (task force, business organization, social movement, state legislature, military unit, nation)” (Hackman & Johnson, 2000, p. 11); vision plus action (Useem, 1998); and “preparing organizations for change and helping them cope as they struggle through it” (Kotter, 2001).

Other factors contribute to the lack of conceptual clarity. As noted, perspectives on leadership often presuppose a particular sectoral or cultural context—a corporation, political party, or public sector organization, for example (Jepson, 2009). Further, some conceptualizations objectify leadership and attempt to describe, explain and predict behavior using the tools of social science (e.g., Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), while others see leadership in more dynamic, idiosyncratic and situationally-specific terms, and approach leadership study and practice as an art (e.g., Kotter, 2001; Maxwell, 1999: Useem, 1998). Some writers focus on leadership as requiring particular insight and knowledge, but others place primary emphasis on behavioral skills. Moreover, some definitions describe leadership in terms of the pursuit of goals that are generally regarded as prosocial, positive, or constructive (e.g., Dubrin, 2004; Hackman &
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