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Growth and Impact: The Dual Purpose of Leadership Development for Professionals in Middle Management Roles

Ask any employee and they will be able to give you the top skills needed by leaders. They quickly rattle off communication, confidence, vision, competency, and a myriad of other skills needed by those in the C-Suite. However, when you ask those same employees how they plan to develop these skills to advance to higher levels, the responses become more obscure. Yet, as pointed out by Mumford et al (2007), it is important that leaders have already attained leadership skills prior to moving into higher level roles and being given the responsibility of leadership. Before a person can fully understand their need to develop leadership skills, they must first recognize themselves as an emerging leader in need of development (Riccio, 2010; Trotta, 2013). Emerging leaders are aware of the skills needed for executive leadership but may not possess the knowledge of how to develop those skills, meaning they enter higher levels of leadership with awareness of what is needed to lead but without the actual skills to do so.

In today's continuously disrupted world of work, the need for leadership is vitally important. Today's leaders must lead in an environment that is variable, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, or VUCA (Turan, H.Y. and Cinnioglu, H., 2022). More than any time in history, it is important that those placed in leadership positions have developed leadership skills prior to being elevated into the position. On the job leadership development is not a reliable option since the job itself changes rapidly and regularly. Organizational leaders walk into positions that require the immediate ability to lead transformational change over people, process, and programs at multiple levels. Intentionally providing leadership experiences to those in middle management allows these individuals the time and experience needed to become the high-level leaders needed to guide successful organizations in a VUCA world. With the knowledge of how to develop transformational leadership skills and the time and space to do so, organizations can prepare future leaders with the leadership skills needed to lead the organization prior to their placement into executive-level positions.

Future preparation for leadership is only one benefit of focused leadership development for those in middle management positions, and organizations do not need to wait for succession opportunities before reaping the benefits of their leadership development investment. Providing developmental leadership experiences to middle managers has the added benefit of strengthening the impact of those in middle management roles while they are still serving in those roles. Mid-level leaders exert influence in many areas of the organization and when allowed to grow within their role, these leaders have an opportunity to expand their impact before moving into higher levels of leadership. As the leader in middle management develops, his or her impact grows as well, and organizations receive the combined benefit of preparing middle managers for future higher-level leadership roles while expanding their influence and impact within their current roles in the organization.

In the discovery of how mid-level leaders develop the skills needed to progress to and be successful in greater leadership roles, it becomes clear that the development of leadership skills is also beneficial to the roles developing leaders currently hold in middle management. Leading transformational change within organizations in today's VUCA world will require leaders with the ability to build relationships, understand their influence, and mobilize others toward common goals. Middle managers are positioned well to be these transformational leaders but often lack the opportunity and knowledge to understand their own leadership influence. With connections to a broad network of leaders, mid-level leaders have interactions that highlight developmental

leadership skills, stimulate confidence, and create practice opportunities needed to be successful as transformational leaders.

Study Description

This phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of leaders in higher education and how they developed the leadership skills needed to perform in higher level

Table 1. Themes and Frequencies

Theme	Frequency	Sources	
1	Establishing a broader network of professional relationships	77	30
2	Creating time and space for self-reflection about vocational aspirations	57	20
3	Building confidence to lean into leadership potential	56	20
4	Using ongoing and systematic feedback to build self-awareness	55	25
5	Stimulating intellectual thought about leadership	53	37
6	Providing up close and personal interactions with senior leaders	46	19
7	Personally affirming leadership potential in individuals	39	19
8	Selecting emerging leaders with identified leadership skills	37	20
9	Cooperatively developing plans to indicate leadership pathways	33	18
10	Highlighting individual changes to establish executive presence	25	9

positions. This study focused on experiences of professionals who had participated in the Leadership Development Institute (LDI) through the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) which has been developing emerging leaders for over 20 years. Study participants held middle management roles during their LDI experience and had advanced to roles in upper management since participation. Interviews with 14 study participants in four states used questions designed to answer the “how” question of leadership development and provide practical application for leadership skills development.

Seeking to gain insight into the study participants’ perspective of how their LDI experience supported the development of the leadership skills for mid-level leaders, the researcher chose a qualitative research approach to provide deeper understanding of the individual experience and perspective. The study sample included middle level participants holding roles of Director or above from multiple states across the U.S. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were developed with the intent to elicit individual responses and perspectives (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). Study validity and reliability were achieved through member checking of interview responses and triangulation of observations and artifact collection. Double coding of the data provided a reliability rate of 88%. Given that there is very little research on the development of leadership skills within middle management professionals and even fewer studies that focus on leadership development within mid-level leaders in higher education, the findings in this study offer specific insight into how leaders in current middle management roles can develop as future executive-level leaders in higher education; however, the results are easily applied to organizations of all types.

Study findings resulted in the themes and frequencies described in Table 1 below.

Theme No. 1 - Establishing a Broader Network of Professional Relationships was overwhelmingly evident at the highest level of frequency, having been identified by 93% of study participants and making it significant to the study. An evaluation of remaining study themes identified that Establishing a Broader Network of Relationships can extrapolate to

indicate many of the other themes (Themes 3, 5, 7, 10) may be the result of and/or related to Theme No. 1. When taken together, the results clearly indicate that leadership skills are developed within the context of a broad range of professional relationships which create developmental experiences for mid-level leaders that can be transferred to higher level leadership roles in the future.

Study results indicate there are specific and purposeful experiences that provide individuals in middle management the opportunity to build the skills needed for higher levels of executive leadership, answering the “how” question of leadership skills development. Although the study resulted in ten themes, further exploration of the results indicates that Themes No. 3, 5, 7, and 10 are closely related to the Theme No. 1, and that the creation of a broad network of professional relationships provides the strongest pathway of developmental opportunities for mid-level leaders seeking leadership skills for higher level leadership roles. Ibarra and Hunter (2007) also understood the importance of varied professional relationships, stating that they served as a resource for the purpose of providing the support, feedback, and knowledge that play a critical role in leadership skills development and in the ultimate success of a leader. Supporting Ibarra and Hunter, this study indicates a broad network of relationships results in an increase in leadership confidence (Theme 3), leadership understanding (Theme 5), perception of personal leadership potential (Theme 7), and attainment of the presence worthy of executive level positions (Theme 10). Each of these skills is necessary for higher-level leadership roles and can be difficult to achieve in the midst of a complex leadership role. These skills are best learned prior to rising to executive levels where they can then be perfected.

Dual Impact of Leadership Development in Middle Management Professionals

A strong professional network allows all parties to benefit from that relationship, and middle managers with a broad network of professional relationships grow in leadership skills for future roles and strengthen their influence while in their current middle management roles. This means that while mid-level leaders are in the process of gaining the skills needed for higher level leadership roles, they can immediately put those skills into practice in their positions within middle management. Expanding their network of relationships to provide diverse and varied interactions allows mid-level leaders to lead from positions of knowledge rather than positions of learning. This practice of higher-level leadership within ’s current role allows for leadership practice in a more comfortable and familiar space.

Professional networks, both formal and informal, create safe spaces to collaborate on ideas, work through problems, and build skills. Organizational communities of practice (CoP) have been shown to deepen knowledge and expertise among people who come together regularly focused on a shared concern, problem, or passion (Weiten, H. & Schultz, N. G., 2019). These shared learning experiences are similar to those experienced within a well-developed network of professional relationships. Weiten, et al. (2019) additionally found that in an academic setting, these CoP networks had a positive impact on employees’ abilities to learn and implement leadership skills while building a trusted network of colleagues. Middle management professionals with the ability to maintain a broad network of trusted colleagues allows them to grow as leaders within a network of professionals on whom they call upon for advice and leadership as they develop. The impact on the next generation of transformational leaders is evident as they are given the chance to learn how to lead before being called upon to do so at fast-changing executive levels.

Leadership Development for Emerging Leaders.

Although consensus is lacking, many scholars agree that leadership is generally concerned with influence while management is focused on organizational activities (Northouse, 2016). Middle managers concern themselves with what needs to be done and executive-level leaders focus on why it should occur. A move from middle management to executive leadership requires understanding of these organizational leadership differences and a shift in executive thinking. A broad network provides exposure to a greater number of people who have attained executive-level leadership skills and connects emerging leaders to a leadership world greater than their own. These connections stimulate a shift in thinking within middle managers from what to why. Study Participant 6 describes this well, saying her broad leadership network expanded her vantage point, while another participant said this “constellation of relationships” has extended her view to include many different leadership pathways. Participants cite their connection to higher level leaders gave them exposure to a variety of leadership skills, styles, and characteristics useful to their own leadership growth and broadened their understanding of leaders and leadership.

A variety of relationships provides varied developmental experiences to influence leadership development, allowing potential leaders a greater opportunity to know what they do not know. Participant 10 indicated her exposure to higher level leaders allowed her to reframe her thinking from mid-management to executive-level leadership and approach her middle-management position with a different mindset. Irvine and Brundet (2017) found that middle-level leaders benefit by seeking leadership knowledge from a variety of experiences, including gathering knowledge from peers and colleagues that can provide advice and expertise. The experience of those who have gone before provides benefit to those who are to follow. These relationships pave the way with specific direction for developing the necessary skills for future leadership roles and give examples to middle managers on how to gain that leadership perspective or as described by Study Participant 12, how to “construct [herself] as a leader.”

Leaders can leverage well-established network relationships to strengthen leadership skills development and maximize growth (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). This variety of professional relationships is valuable to leadership development because it provides exposure outside the individual’s immediate sphere and gives a broader perspective of leadership. Study participant 11 indicated that exposure to a large network of leaders made leadership seem less intimidating and full of possibilities. She grew in confidence that she had the capability of becoming a higher-level leader and needed only to develop the skills for those roles. Study comments such as these showed confidence in leadership potential (Theme 3) to be closely related to maintaining a large variety of professional relationships. Relationships provide exposure to different people with varying skills, giving emerging leaders confidence they could also lead. Channing, 2020 reports that emerging leaders learn about leadership by observing effective behaviors of successful leaders and avoiding ineffective behaviors of poor leaders. Having a broad network of leader relationships provides a broader spectrum for leadership observations.

As evidenced by the frequency of Theme No. 1, Establishing a Broader Network of Professional Relationships, the importance of these relationships for direction to middle management leaders developing leadership skills is not lost on leaders in those positions. Leadership is learned through meaningful experiences gained by working with others and then applying that learning to one’s own leadership practices (Channing, 2022). Interactions with colleagues, peers, and leaders who have previously risen to higher organizational levels stimulates new thinking on leadership and creates depth of understanding on how leaders lead. Interactions with different leaders provide examples to emerging leaders that can be drawn upon

in the future while developing their own potential and establishing the executive-level skills needed for higher leadership levels.

Influence and Impact of Middle Management Professionals

For leadership development to be most effective, however, individuals must first identify themselves as leaders (Orsini, J. and Coers, N., 2022). For many middle management professionals, this is a new understanding of their own leadership influence. They realize their potential for solving problems and getting things done but do not equate these skills or others to higher-level leadership. The movement from middle management thinking to higher-level leadership thinking requires a shift in focus from operational relationships to leadership relationships. A large network of professional relationships assists in shifting this thought process by providing middle managers with an opportunity to gain understanding of their own influence and impact before they face the increased pressure of executive leadership. Participant 10 said it this way:

Somehow along the way, I think we forget to do that for the other people we serve with. It becomes all about you and what you do and how can you improve... to have folks who sat there and specifically responded to you as if you had something special to offer was – in some ways – mind blowing.

Participant 10 further explains her shift to see herself as both a leader now and a leader in the future, by saying she has always seen herself as “a good number two,” and has now realized she is “more than just a good number two; those skills are actually needed in an executive leader.” She has developed greater “confidence in her own skill set” and sees herself differently because of that confidence. The professional leadership relationships discussed in Theme No. 1 build the confidence that is described in Theme No. 3 and Theme No. 7. Middle managers can use this confidence to step into their own levels of influence within their middle management roles and shine. Becoming a successful leader requires a shift from a confining operational network of individuals who guide the functions of one’s daily duties to a broader network of professional relationships that allow an emerging leader to multiply their leadership skills (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). Seeing themselves as an executive leader provides new motivation for mid-level leaders to lean into their current mid-level leadership roles with greater confidence.

Simply by their placement in the middle, leaders in middle management hold the unique position of being able to influence organizational activities both up and down the organizational chart (Kimonyo, T., Ngari, J. & Muchara, M., 2022). Professionals in middle management roles often find themselves acting as leader in one setting and a follower in another (Irvine & Brundett, 2017). By title, the role of middle manager places these individuals in the midst of the organization, and it is not unusual for a middle manager to attend a meeting with the CEO and the Facilities Manager in the same day. The limited authority that often accompanies these middle management positions can appear less threatening to others, providing an easier opportunity to engage with a wider variety of people at all levels of organizational leadership. This ability to effectively work at different levels is the conduit for building a broad network of relationships with people of varying levels of influence, increasing the influence and impact across the organization of middle level professionals. Their capacity to move easily between different organizational levels enhances the impact middle managers have on organizational effectiveness and demonstrates that achievement of organizational objectives may, in some instances, be more efficient from the middle than from higher organizational levels.

Although it may afford an opportunity to move easily among organizational levels, the middle management role also holds the sometimes-uncomfortable position of being accountable

to a wide range of stakeholders from senior management to customers (Irvine & Brundett, 2017). Middle managers often have the role of ensuring instructions from upper management are carried out by followers at lower levels or seeking instruction from people above to communicate with clarity to those who follow. Mid-level leaders function as knowledge brokers to improve organizational outcomes (Boutcher, F., Berta, W., Urquhart, R., & Gagliardi, A. R., 2022). They are the carriers of organizational knowledge, vision, and mission to all levels and all people.

The ability to leverage various organizational relationships creates opportunities for career success among mid-level professionals that are lacking when a smaller network of relationships exists (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). The influence possessed by individuals in middle management impacts their developmental growth as leaders by providing opportunities to develop leadership skills such as negotiating, team building, communication, and decision making. Leadership skills are developed through observation and practice which are quite evident at the middle management position, provided there is opportunity to grow a broad network of relationships to allow for varied leadership experiences. As middle management professionals put their learning into practice within their current roles, their impact and influence grows across organizational levels, creating transformational change both in the leader and the organization.

Influence and leadership exercised by mid-level leaders and managers links various organizational work groups and is based on the relationships they build (Spagnoli P, Manuti A, Buono C, & Ghislieri C., 2021). Exercising a high level of influence over organizational performance is a routine aspect of those in middle management but is often unrecognized by the individuals holding those positions. The impact of middle managers through their organizational relationships is of utmost importance to the overall success of organizational goals, yet this impact is often unseen by the individual. Recognition of this influence is instrumental to the achievement of the leadership goals of those in middle management (Theme 7). A broad network of relationships provides the opportunity for other leaders to affirm this leadership and strengthen the confidence of mid-level leaders to lean into their own organizational influence.

Mid-level leaders must recognize their own leadership and middle management leaders who display leadership within their networks and professional relationships have an influence that may exceed their formal authority, allowing them to perform exceptionally (Hersch, 2015). Leadership is not the same as authority and authority is not the same as influence. By leaning into a broad network of professional relationships, mid-level leaders develop the confidence in their influence and ability which supports them in the middle management role that is often one of relational influence without positional authority. Understanding the organizational benefit and impact of their role in middle management strengthens the leadership understanding of middle managers, providing strength to continue to walk in those roles with confidence and presence (Themes 3, 5, 10)

Summary and Conclusion

There is a connection between leadership and management. Literature asserts that leadership requires both fixed traits and developed skills (Northouse, 2016). Beyond managerial skills, emerging mid-level leaders must develop the executive-level leadership skills required for higher-level positions. To develop leadership skills beyond management levels, mid-level leaders must have opportunities to interact with leaders who they can emulate or shy away from as needed. A broad network of professional relationships is a key factor in the ability of mid-level leaders to gain the skills needed for higher level leadership roles. Exposure to a variety of

leaders, skills, and styles supports the growth of mid-level leaders for future roles while also developing skills and influence useful in their current role.

Leadership is built on relationships. Participants in Channing's 2020 study assert that developing leaders want "relationship-based professional development and practice-based coaching" along with "hands-on opportunities" with "stand-out leaders" to see "success in action." Learning is a dynamic process occurring through observation and experience. When middle level leaders maintain a broad range of professional relationships, they have multiple opportunities to engage with a variety of leaders possessing a wide range of leadership skills. Strengthening professional networks and/or communities of practice for leadership development among middle management level professionals cannot be overlooked. Engagement with a large and diverse network of professionals creates leadership development for mid-level leaders that serves a dual purpose of growth for future leadership roles and enhanced impact and influence in current roles, providing a win for the individual and a win for the organization.

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