

LEADING FROM AUTHENTICITY: USING STRENGTHS-BASED COACHING TO CLARIFY THE LEADERSHIP IDENTITIES OF YEAR 11 BOYS

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Abstract

Within my school, some Year 11 boys demonstrate a lack of maturity and insight when applying for Year 12 leadership positions in that their motivations are not grounded in their strengths, skills, and competencies. This action research project explored whether using a strengths-based coaching intervention might clarify the leadership identity of Year 11 boys. A three-stage action was undertaken to teach a new language of signature strengths, to participate in individual coaching to build self-awareness, and then to develop a personal leadership narrative that reflected a deeper more authentic self-awareness. Inductive analysis was utilized to analyse the collected data after categorization and coding. The Leadership Identity Development (LID) model was used to locate boys within a stage of that developmental model. The findings show that where new self-awareness was evoked in a boy, that awareness was evidenced by a shift in the language of his personal leadership narrative. Additionally, a boy's location within the LID model was an indicator of the horizon of leadership impact available to him at his developmental stage. This research suggests that individual coaching can work to deepen self-awareness, and that, used in the context of a comprehensive leadership identity development model, such an LID can indicate the next appropriate area for leadership development on an individual development pathway.

Glossary

Leadership identity: The Leadership Identity Development (LID) theory (2006) was developed by Susan Komives (Komives, Longenecker, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006) and contains several aspects:

- the set of traits, strengths or characteristics that an individual boy displays, specifically showing the ranking of some traits more strongly than other traits
- a personality type, which describes a particular mixture of strengths and styles that create the whole person
- from a developmental perspective, a location within the progression of developing complexity of leadership identity

Personal leadership narrative: An individual story of an aspirational future state that expresses how a boy might apply his personal characteristics, skills, personality and experience to serve and to lead. The story or narrative is used as a medium because it goes beyond a mechanical set of actions, in order to evoke and engage an emotional world, often using metaphor and archetypes. The marketing world would describe this as a “personal brand” or a “brand story” (Rampersad, 2008). Stories are most effective when believable, grounded, and authentic, which requires deepening self-awareness. A distinction needs to be made between a story and a narrative: when discussing future possibilities, a narrative is a snapshot in time of a broader evolving and changeable story (Boje, 2011). This is particularly relevant for the young adult boys with whom we are working, who are in varying stages of identity formation. We need to leave the possibility open that their personal leadership narrative has plasticity and can evolve with them in future.

Introduction

St Andrew’s College has been developing a cross-grade leadership education programme, branded internally as “Leading Edge,” over the past four years. The intention is to provide as many opportunities as possible to lead for every boy in the school throughout their school journey, and to move away from dependence on a formal leadership title in order to lead.

Towards the end of Grade 11, the boys put forward motivations to serve as school Prefects in Grade 12. In general, the motivations in past years have reflected a lack of maturity and insight in that the motivations are not grounded in the strengths, skills, and competencies of the individual, and reflect a lack of personal awareness of service and leadership. I wanted to help boys clarify their leadership motivations through this research.

My research question was focused on the possibilities of using coaching in this context: *How can personal leadership narratives help Grade 11 boys to clarify their leadership identity?* To clarify something means to make it easier to understand, usually by explaining it in more detail. I would know if the action was effective if the boys were able to report that they had a deeper understanding of their own leadership identity and were able to describe their leadership identity in greater detail or by using new language. This approach of using coaching has broad applicability in adult development theory, but is not yet broadly researched in adolescent and young adult realms. I was, therefore, curious about researching the technique with young adults, and action research provided an excellent vehicle due to its flexible nature as “a process that requires us to ‘test’ our ideas about education” (Mertler, 2016, p. 18).

The power of using stories or narratives as the medium for boys to use their new self-awareness to evoke future action is in the ability of the story medium to cut across cognitive

and emotional domains and enable the embodiment of the new story. Using digital storytelling - to produce a personal brand “manifesto” video - appeals to boys who are immersed in the connected social-media world.

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted across the domains of leadership development, personal identity development through self-awareness, and stories, metaphors and narratives as aspirational and creative tools.

There is no lack of research into leadership; leadership development in a business context is a massive industry fed by ongoing research within business schools. Within this area, however, estimated at more than 1,000 studies over 50 years (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2007), a definitive profile of personal traits that result in leadership success has not emerged. Leadership development literature points strongly to deepening self-awareness being a key aspect of leadership development. Leadership success is indicated when a set of approaches to life are followed, which include internal work of contextualising your life story and practising self-awareness, and external relational actions such as building a support network and empowering others (George et al., 2007). Daniel Goleman (2004) has popularised this thinking in his research on emotional intelligence, positing that most effective leaders have a high degree of emotional intelligence. For Goleman (2004), the components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill.

Leadership occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships. However, to effectively lead others, one must first be able to lead themselves (Neck & Manz, 2007). Neck and Manz assert that "the instrument of leadership is the self, and the mastery of the art of leadership comes from the mastery of the self" (p. 344). Knott-Craig (2007), in his meta-analysis of leadership trends as applied to South African schools, notes that:

A trend emerges that reveals that organisational theory and personal leadership theory have converged to a position where they meet at community. This is seen in the value that organisations have begun to place on people, the development of relationships and greater participation by the followers. (p. 36)

Leadership could be defined as the outcome of influencing others.

As attention has turned to leadership development in younger adults and adolescents, the open and non-prescriptive nature of leadership attributes can therefore be considered in a similar way to other aspects of identity development: on a developmental continuum. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) put forward a three-stage model: awareness, interaction, and

mastery. Komives (2005) first studied the development of a leadership identity in her grounded theory study and followed it up (Komives, 2006) with a 6-stage leadership identity development (LID) model. This model is useful in that it provides a scaffold within which to work with adolescents and young adults, with specific indicators for the developmental changes that occur in transition between stages. In adolescence, we are emerging from an externally-created reality towards an awareness of responsibility for making meaning and self-authorship (Kegan, 1994; Magolda, 2008) and this maps to the transitions between stage 2 (Exploration/Engagement) and stage 3 (Leader Identified) on the LID model (Komives, 2006).

If we accept that leadership is developmental in nature rather than innate, the question then arises as to which interventions we can use to shift adolescents and young adults along the leadership identity development continuum. My focus was specifically on deepening self-awareness, constructing meaning from that awareness, and then moving that awareness into relational action, or influence. Ann Fudge, CEO of Y&R (as cited in George et al., 2007) notes:

All of us have the spark of leadership in us, whether it is in business, in government, or as a nonprofit volunteer. The challenge is to understand ourselves well enough to discover where we can use our leadership gifts to serve others. (p. 2)

Potential self-awareness interventions towards understanding leadership identity could include positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), strengths education (Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham & Mayerson, 2015; Waters, 2011) and personality profiling such as MBTI or Enneagram (Tieger, Barron & Tieger, 2014). Life-story interventions can also assist, giving context and meaning to past experiences (Shamir & Eilam, 2018; Sparrowe, 2005).

Our historical life story is told through a metaphorical frame and context: “In all aspects of life ... we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor” (Lakoff, 1980, p. 158). However, self-awareness and knowledge alone are not enough to create action in the world (Seiler, 2010). If action is not intrinsically evoked, then coaching is an intervention to move the student into action towards their goals. Coaching can also be thought of as theoretical positive psychology put into practice (Boniwell, 2012). Through ontological coaching, true learning will integrate into a way of being that includes cognitive, emotional and somatic experiences, and through practice, they will become unconscious lived skills. Sieler (2010) states, “the essential goal of the coach is to be a catalyst for change by respectfully and constructively triggering a shift in the coachee’s way of being to enable him or her to develop perceptions and behaviours that were previously unavailable” (p. 109). Coaching offers

an opportunity to integrate self-awareness into action, in the form of personal narratives of future possibilities. Coaching also, by its nature of deepening an individual relationship, builds “presence” between the coach and the boy, which Reichert and Hawley (2010) offer as an effective strategy for creating a positive context for learning with boys.

The premise is that we can use coaching to help students to outline alternative possibilities through new stories and new metaphors in order to create new ways of being. This technique has been applied in narrative therapy (Milojević, 2014). Lakoff (1980) calls these new metaphors: “New metaphors ... can have the power to define reality. They do this through a coherent network of entailments that highlight some features of reality and hide others” (p. 157). Oettingen and Cachia (2016), however, raise a warning note that research shows that these new stories and positive thinking alone will not create results. In fact, positive future fantasies alone hampered effort and action towards the fantasy. The results run counter to the popular culture maxims espoused in the likes of Rhonda Byrne’s “The Secret.” Instead, a technique of “mental contrasting” (Oettingen & Cachia, 2016, p. 555) is outlined in which the future goals are contrasted with the real obstacles and challenges impeding the goals, which it is claimed generate the impetus to take action.

The planned action of this project was for the boys to create a multimodal digital story (Alonso, Molina & Requejo, 2013) artefact in the form of a video. Reichert and Hawley (2010) found evidence of the effectiveness of creating products as appealing to boys and engaging them in the learning process. I have called the proposed video a personal leadership narrative, which might also be called a personal leadership manifesto. The marketing world would describe this as a “personal brand” or a “brand story” (Rampersad, 2008). This is an individual story of an aspirational future state that expresses how a boy might apply his personal goals, characteristics, skills, personality, and experience to serve and to lead. Andersen and Tisdall (2016) have used the medium to examine the historical context of identity, but there is limited research of the effectiveness of using digital stories as a tool to express an aspirational leadership identity in adolescents. I was curious to observe any resonance between the integration of “diverse semiotic channels” (Alonso et al., 2013, p. 1) in digital storytelling and Sieler’s (2010) new integrated “way of being” (p. 109) of ontological coaching: both have a basis in meaning-making through language and narrative.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine boys’ perceptions of the clarification of their leadership identity from the self-awareness interventions that culminated in the digital storytelling experience.

Research Context

The research participants were fifteen Grade 11 boys (age 16-17 years old) in the final term of their year, as they prepared to transition into the formal leadership positions of their Grade 12 year. This is the point in time when they put forward motivations in the form of written applications for the various formal school Prefect positions. This is also a time of both excitement at being appointed, and disappointment for those who are not appointed, and of taking up the mantle of responsibility for the final few weeks of the school year.

The broader Grade 11 cohort of about 100 boys attended the initial lessons on self-awareness language and tools during the Life Orientation class-time. During the lesson, there was a call for volunteers for the further action research. The volunteers were self-selecting, being those boys who had a desire to work on their leadership identity development at the time they were motivating their applications for the school leadership positions. Fifteen boys volunteered. The boys and their parents were sent an information letter outlining the action, the option to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of the data. Both boys and their parents then completed a consent form to participate in the action research.

The Action

The action consisted of three distinct parts. In part one, the focus was on teaching a new language of character strengths. We were fortunate to have Mr. Simon Murray, a world expert on positive education, visit our campus during the term and run workshops with the Grade 11 boys, which gave them further conceptual information and terminology on positive psychology. The culmination of this phase was the completion of the online VIA Survey of Character Strengths.

In the second part of the action, individual coaching sessions were held with the participants. The conversation was structured around the theme of the boy's personal leadership goals for his Grade 12 year. I used the coaching conversation to reflect back to each boy several aspects of his underlying way of being, and then to discuss the feedback in order to build his self-awareness. At the end of the coaching conversation the boy had an opportunity to express his personal leadership narrative out loud.

The final step was to express the personal leadership narrative as a short video using the digital storytelling medium of Adobe Spark (to incorporate text, images, music). This platform was selected because the school provides the Adobe Suite licensing to students and because this tool is a simple drag-and-drop storyboard building interface where users can add their own text, photos, and music to a selection of pre-existing templates to create the output. The focus for this project was not on grappling with a technical platform, but rather on selecting the most

evocative images, words and music to express a personal leadership narrative.

Data Collection

The data collected were qualitative in nature, which aligned well with the very individual, personal, and context-specific nature of the topic: personal leadership identity. Data collection took place through a variety of methods: pre- and post-worksheets, video recordings of coaching conversations with participants, researcher observations and field notes, participant leadership motivation letters, student self-assessments and online tools, participant written reflections, and submissions of the final personal leadership narrative digital story.

Prior to the beginning of the action, the full Grade cohort attended a single-lesson overview of the topic and completed a worksheet during the lesson. The worksheet also called for volunteers for the action research, and in this way the research participants were self-selected. The aim of this process was both to provide an equal opportunity for participation, as well as to gather pre-action data. I also collected the boys' prefectship application forms as an additional data point, giving insight into the boys' leadership identity prior to the action.

Next, the boys completed the online VIA Strengths profile exercise and attended a further lecture on Positive Education and Leadership, delivered by Mr. Simon Murray. This provided a globally-benchmarked ranking of their personal character strengths, along with further context of the specific language of strengths. After the lecture the boys were asked to reflect on the new personal insights generated by the strengths survey.

Each boy was scheduled for an hour-long individual coaching session, which was a structured and intentional conversation to elicit their current leadership identity, the existing narratives that framed their views on themselves in relation to leadership, and to focus on their personal future goals for leadership. This coaching session was video-recorded, allowing me to be very focused on the conversation as it unfolded.

The boys then spent some time writing their personal leadership narratives, selecting words, images and music that best evoked the desired impact, and produced digital stories using Adobe Spark templates. They also gave written reflections on the coaching experience and on their developing views of leadership.

Data Analysis

I used all of the qualitative data, including my field notes and observations, to code the data and identify themes. Polyangulation (Mertler 2017) - using multiple sources - ensured trustworthiness and consistency. While the topic of the research was personal to each boys'

unique character, framing it within the developmental leadership identity, as well as using the VIA Strengths framework provided a common basis for finding themes.

The bulk of the data were in unstructured digital format, due to their conversational nature, and transcription was required to perform coding and theme identification. Deep analysis of the use of language was used to identify the underlying stories and to notice shifts in the stories as the action progressed. While onerous, this approach of recording conversations was critical to allowing the boys' voices to be accurately represented.

I analysed the written responses and the video interviews by categorizing and coding into several strands that followed the longitudinal process of the action steps, comparing data gathered pre- and post-action, and within each of the stages of the action. I also considered where to locate each participant within the stages of the Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model (Komives, 2006), comparing my data with the categories of the model. I then further grouped and coded the common themes horizontally across the cohort of participants.

Discussion of Results

On analysis, two major themes emerged from the coding and categorisation of the quantitative and qualitative data:

1. Where new self-awareness was evoked in a boy, that awareness was evidenced by a shift in their language. This was observed across several different aspects of self-awareness.
2. The stage of leadership identity development correlated with the scope of impact of the leadership mission to which boys aspired.

Self-awareness was Evidenced by a Shift in Boys' Language.

The linguist Whorf (as cited in Linkins et al., 2015) asserts that "language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about," (p. 66) and Sieler's (2010) premise from ontological coaching is that "language generates reality" (p. 115). Regardless of the type of self-awareness evoked during the action, it was given language by the boy in his leadership narrative and reflections.

The data shows shifts in several different aspects of self-awareness, including new awareness of personal strengths (Linkins et al., 2015), an awareness of what "flow" is for the individual (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000), new awareness of what a boy's body language is unconsciously communicating (Sieler, 2010), and an awareness of the limitations or blind spots of a particular "way of being" (Sieler).

What are my signature strengths? The online VIA Survey of Character Strengths

(www.viacharacter.org) was the tool used to give boys an insight into their signature strengths. For some, it was simply a new awareness. Boy E commented in a post-action reflection that he had “learned that humour is one of my strengths.” Boy G started with a view that “some of my strengths that were low down should be higher up, like spirituality” and then concluded with a nuanced insight that possibly the strengths of Bravery, Love and Teamwork, that were higher up his strengths ranking, could be seen as aspects of his own spirituality. Boy D, for whom the strengths exercise was “interesting, and pretty accurate,” was able to link an awareness of strengths into his new narrative of leadership: “Everyone has different qualities, leading is just noticing those qualities within yourself and others and then using them the right way.”

What is my body saying unconsciously? I specifically mirrored back to each boy my perceptions of their body language shifts during their coaching conversation. It was remarkable to me that Boy A sat far forward in his seat during our conversation, which I found at odds with his leadership narrative “to create a comfortable space.” After being made aware of this, he reflected post-action that sometimes “I neglect the idea of personal space and should resist the temptation to converge on others’ conversations.” I mirrored back to Boy B that his leadership narrative, which was focused on “taking responsibility and serving”, was delivered to me in a flat tone of voice, and he acknowledged that “my friends say I’m not very zestful.”

It was an important insight for Boy C, who frequently used the words “chilled” and “mellow” and reflected that attitude in his posture, that he became most animated and energetic when speaking to me about his views on fairness within the boarding house. He reflected that “I am very passionate about certain topics and my body language and expressions show that.”

When am I most in flow? During each coaching conversation, I explored with the boys evidence from their own lives of being in flow. For several of the boys this was most powerfully evident on the sports field and for others in leisure time outside of the school environment. For each boy there was evidence beyond his words, because his body language would also shift when talking about his zone of flow and this was mirrored back to him in the conversation.

Boy A’s body language changed significantly when he talked about his rugby team and “the vibe you get when in the team.” Boy B said his “mind is always busy thinking about my next goal, but in hockey that just goes away and the only thing on my mind is that game. Which is nice.” He later offered that a mantra he’d learned on the hockey field of “hot body/cool mind” was the leadership narrative he would use to bring more balance between action and mindfulness.

Boy E, with a broad grin, offered that “I love tennis, sir. I don’t know what it is. Playing tennis you never get tired, I can just keep on going.” Later in the process, Boy E’s leadership narrative included the phrases “staying in the moment” and “leading from the heart.”

For Boy D it was also tennis where he could “just lose myself in the match. Outsmart and outplay my opponent. Outsmarting feels good!” In his reflection, Boy D indicated that “I was able to take out a vital question: how to apply the getting into the zone like in a tennis match into other areas of my life.”

What are my blind spots? During coaching I worked with each boy to look at possible limitations or boundaries of a particular way of being. Boy G started with a strident view that “I’ve always known that leadership is about sacrificing yourself for the betterment of others.” During the coaching I was curious as to whether this was a blind spot and asked “Is that fun?” There was a long pause, after which he responded that “there is a time and a place.” This phrase was later integrated into his leadership narrative.

Boy B’s combination of signature strengths, his narrative, and his demeanour all indicated to me a potential imbalance towards seriousness and carefulness. When I asked him “In what space might it be OK for you to just be a boy and have fun and not worry about rules?” he responded that “sometimes it might be just spending time with my dorm doing stupid things like going on a night-swim.” In his final reflection, his leadership narrative had shifted to acknowledge this insight: “I always saw leadership as a servant role to lead through example and not force. This mindset hasn’t changed. Just the reminder that small things matter. Enjoy the small moments too.”

A Boys’ Leadership Identity Development Stage Correlated With his Desired Leadership Mission

The literature warns against placing too much weight on “scoring” individuals quantitatively on the LID Model (Komives, 2006), but suggests instead locating them within a developmental stage with the sole purpose of identifying the next appropriate developmental activities. I located the boys within the study predominantly in “Stage 3 – Leader Identified”, with some in the earlier “Stage 2 – Exploration/Engagement”, and one in transition to “Stage 4 – Leadership Differentiated” (p. 404, Figure 1).

An emergent theme from my data is that the location of the boy within the LID Model stages correlates with the scope of impact of the leadership mission that the boy aspires to and is drawn to. The horizon of leadership impact available to the boy may be correlated to his developmental stage. Komives (2006) describes this as a “broadening view of leadership” (p. 403).

I engaged the boys I had located in the Exploration/Engagement stage, who had applied for prefect positions and been unsuccessful, with the idea of leadership outside of a titled position. Although they were able to describe examples of leading without a title (for example as a senior

boy in a sports team or a club), they could not perceive the space to lead without the title of leader. When I observed to Boy F that “it sounds like you are already the head of your club,” he responded, “I’ll claim it!”

I observed that the boys I had located in the Leader Identified stage are mostly drawn to the leadership mission of rectifying challenges they perceived within the school hierarchy. This seems a natural outcome of the defined prefect role, with a scope of impact within the school group. Within this group I observed further distinctions, which aligned with the “transactional” to “transformational” leadership concepts outlined by Knott-Craig (2007, p. 28). The continuum went from a leadership mission purely to get tasks done (“the house is a shambles and it didn’t work sweetly. I want to get order back into the house” – Boy G), towards leadership with a mission to create an empowering culture and environment. Boy D expressed this as “a Grade 8 or 9 boy shouldn’t be scared to engage with an older boy. I want to bridge the gap. That’s what I’d like to achieve.”

The scope of Boy H’s leadership mission was already beyond the boundaries of the school group. He asserted that, “giving back and bringing people together is an important thing you can do in your life.” He recounted having conceptualised and then organised a public event outside of school in his area of interest, demonstrating to me complex leadership capabilities. In his leadership narrative he brought together threads of self-awareness of his signature strengths, an unconcern with positional titles, together with acknowledgement of the relational interdependence required of leadership in the further developmental stages. “I persevere through things, I’m determined, but at the same time to meet a goal - I’m caring, I’m loving - so I’m not going to put someone else down to better myself. Everyone must come together, even if it means I don’t go as far. We did this together as a team.” He had reached an internalised leadership identity and did not need to be *the* leader in order to be *a* leader.

Conclusion

Interventions that seek to build the self-awareness of boys can be used as part of leadership identity development. Specifically, individual coaching conversations can surface awareness of different aspects of self, integrating across the domains of language, emotions and body. This awareness can be evidenced by new language the boys are able to use in their personal leadership narrative. Boys also responded positively to the coaching process itself, as Boy E commented, “I really enjoyed this conversation, sir, I’m actually quite sad it ended.” Critically, the new narratives can be considered more authentic – as distinct from mimicked – because they were generated from a clearer view of self. This finding aligns well with the “Developing Self” category (Komives, 2006) of leadership identity development.

A complementary finding was that increased self-awareness did not necessarily correlate with a boy's location within a leadership identity developmental continuum. Rather, his developmental stage correlated with the horizon of leadership impact available to him. The LID Model (Komives, 2006) speaks of the interplay of "Broadening View of Leadership" with "Changing View of Self with Others" during the transitions between developmental stages on the model. The learning is that boys within the same year and exposed to the same self-awareness development opportunities should be encouraged to apply the new learnings within the context of their leadership identity development stage, and schools might consider what appropriate opportunities are provided for boys at every stage of development.

Further inquiry might follow a cohort of boys on a longitudinal study, certainly beyond the three-month scope of this action research and preferably over several years, in order to further understand the applicability of the LID Model for adolescent boys. A second angle of inquiry might look to map the activities of our school's "Leading Edge" whole-school program to the LID Model. This might provide leadership identity development pathways for our boys that are even more individualized, in order to meet them where they are in their own development journey. This may also surface any gaps in the program. Finally, the LID Model could be used as part of a tracking or measurement tool to profile the impact of the "Leading Edge" program over time.

Reflection

Working with the boys in the research group was a privilege. A coaching conversation is a space of trust and courage, and the boys were generous with their sharing and open to receiving feedback. In my specific role in the school, I do not get to engage with the boys at this level regularly, and so this opportunity was welcome. I recognize also that each coaching conversation offers self-awareness growth for the coach, and through each conversation I was also able to learn and adjust and become more fluent in my own coaching practice.

I loved the analysis part of the project, and that it then opened several new and related possible pathways for inquiry. The question raised more questions!

There were several challenges for me on the project. The first was time. My role within the school meant I had to plan very carefully to make space for the work and when pressure built in my main role, action research work became deprioritized. I was also too ambitious on the scope of the action and tried to fit too much into the project, with the result that few boys completed the final video assignment before the term ended. I am thankful for the guidance offered by my mentors, Bruce Collins and Craig Cuyler, that helped me manage this during the process. The second challenge was the ability to filter through the literature for the

“nuggets” and to continually hone the focus of my research question. I kept going back and reading more in the hope of finding a unified theory! I believe the research process has made me humbler about any grand designs I had on the process of growing the body of knowledge. If anything, my project is a small offering towards a much larger ongoing conversation.

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