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How leadership learning creates results in organisations

Per Tryding
About this paper

Think about a couple of things you can do to improve your personal performance. Or the performance of your organisation. I bet that the words training, education or development will turn up pretty quick. And – probably – leadership.

And yet it is very hard to define just what it is with education or training (or whatever you call it) that delivers the results you want. It is even hard to know how large the result is. the same goes for leadership – what is this thing we call leadership and just how is it helpful?

And put them together: “Leadership development”, “management training” and “executive education”.

How is it that sending one manager away on training is helpful for a whole organisation? Should we even expect it to matter? If yes, what is it in the education that works? Can we figure out if it is worth our time and money?

These were the questions that motivated my research into learning, organisations and leadership.

They made me curious. But there is actually even more at stake than that. If we can’t answer these issues as we enter into a world we call the knowledge society, I think we might be in trouble.

Luckily it was possible to find at least some of the answers.

MiL was part of it.

MiL is interesting for many reasons. One is its history and the ideology of MiL, which is every bit as interesting as Levin’s work and the development of T-groups from a theoretical point of view. From a practical point of view MiL was early in building a leadership program that recognised the students as co-creators of knowledge and developed the notion that knowing to learn is the most important learning of all.

This is why I have written this paper.

When you read it, think about whether it makes sense to you and help you answer these issues. If not, please let me know. Maybe then we can learn together.

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DR PER TRYDING

Per Tryding holds a Ph.D. from the department of learning at the University of Aarhus (Denmark) and has a background in business and economics (M.Sc. International Business and Economics, Lund University). His thesis dealt with the value added of executive management education. He is a former board member of the MiL Institute and is currently vice president of the Chamber of Commerce of southern Sweden.
PER TRYDING

How leadership learning creates results in organisations

SUMMARY

There is no clear agreement about what leadership and management is exactly. Many competing ideas exist. Amazon.com holds over 250,000 titles which include the word management. Google scholar finds 1,650,000 scientific articles containing the word “leadership” in their title.

But when it comes to the learning of leadership and management, this seems to fall into two main categories. If you attend an executive MBA or MiL’s MEC-program there are two types of learning contribution from the programs.

One is cognitive skills development and the other is interperson (or people) skills development.

In statistical analysis this development turns out to be significantly related to achieving results in terms of career progression (salary, positions) and organisational performance. In other words there is firm proof that attending these programs actually gives return on investment.

This paper mainly deals with how this works. How may these skills, which are learned during a program result in results for an organisation.

Managers spend most of their time in meetings (about 70%) and the rest of the time they work at their desk (about 30%) or travel to meetings. Desk work is essentially about preparing meetings or executing decisions made in meetings.

Meetings and interpersonal relationships are therefore key in leadership. Leadership and management take place during meetings. Meetings are the place where reflective processes for problem solving and development happen. I call this “reflection-in-session”.

These reflective processes can be influenced by a manager in two principal ways. One is by contributing with their own luggage of experience, business know-how and creativity. This ability can be improved through cognition development. The other is by influencing the whole meeting process as such. By making other members of the organisation contribute more to the reflective processes the power of the whole organisation can be boosted. The manager’s ability to do this can be improved by developing interpersonal (or people) skills.

MiL’s MEC program stands out in its ability to achieve interperson development. Examples include how participants develop design skills for shared knowledge and openness and the ability to design reflection processes in an organisation. This is grounded in the behaviour of the leader, which is influenced during the program.
For instance by listening before concluding, acting on trust, holding back power in favour of responsibility. This is how organisational results are achieved.

Finally there is an important condition for organisational results which is crucial. This is the relationship between the manager and his or her organisation. How this relationship works – the “organisational fit” – is what matters most for retention. If the fit is good, the manager is likely to stay longer. This is largely (but not only) up to the organisation. Delivery of results is a two-way street. The data indicate that a good relationship or fit double the chances of application of new skills and almost triples the likelihood that the manager stays in the sponsoring organisation.
1. AN OPTIONAL INTRODUCTION:
CAN YOU LEARN LEADERSHIP AND WHAT IS IT YOU WOULD NEED TO LEARN?

Before dealing with the real issue of this paper, there are some very basic but crucial questions that need to be addressed.

Anyone interested in learning about leadership will need to confront these. Depending on your answer you might want to spend your time on something else than leadership development and learning.

The issues are basically these.

- Can leadership be learned?

This is a classic question, but an important one. It relates to the nature versus nurture debate: is it genes or environment that determines success?

- And what is it that leaders know or do that should be learned? In other words what is leadership?

Even if leadership can be learned, there is the question what it is that we need to learn, i.e. what leadership is?

- What about leadership can be learned?

Finally and in summary this is the most important question of all. We may be able to learn and we may know what to learn – but what can we learn? Maybe we can only learn aspects of leadership? The limits are set by the student’s ability to learn and how well this is assisted.

1.1. Can leadership be learned?

Before discussing what leadership is, it is worthwhile to consider if that is at all a relevant question. If it is all in the genes, any education is wasted.¹

Some believe that leadership is in the genes. Then learning it seems a bit futile. All you need is the right parents and a chance to try your leadership out. If you don’t have any of these, don’t bother.

A good place to look for the answer to this question is to study educational research. Here the issue has been investigated at great length and detail. What can be learned and what is pure talent? This has been studied by e.g. by observing twins and large groups of people using statistics.

The consensus in research seems to be that it is a mix of learning and talent. The proportions are however hard to determine exactly. The issue is also muddled by factors such as environment, inner and external motivators and so on.

¹ In fact all we need to do is to find leaders– or better still – wait for them to arrive. The hope which is sometimes voiced to the effect that “what we need now is a strong leader” is expression of this view. Many seem to hold the view that talent is all that matters.
The effect of education is therefore said to come from two sources. One is the actual learning during the education. The other is the sorting effect. The sorting is the ability of a particular educational program to attract people with suitable ability. (And there is also an element of self-selection among the attendants)

For an employer the bottom line is that people, who have taken a certain education, for instance engineering, are probably better at engineering than others. If it’s because of the sorting effect or the learning may be of less importance.

In leadership education, which targets experienced leaders, there is definitely a sorting effect. The fact that the attendants chose to spend time on development, and have somehow found the resources for it, sort them out from other leaders.

In my own research I used statistical analysis to isolate the learning effect. The order of magnitude was that about 10% of the salary increase after graduation was due to learning effects. Things that were learned resulted in behaviour that triggered a reward. (It may be more, but that is all that I could capture with the method used).

It is interesting to notice that the really great sports athletes often get annoyed when it is suggested that they earned their prizes because of their talent. That others are quick to attribute their success to a lucky gene-pool belittles their effort. They know all the thousands of hours they spend, mostly many more than their peers, perfecting their skills. They know that practice, i.e. learning, had a great deal to do with it. (But for the rest of us who can’t stomach the idea of all that practice it is convenient to use our lack of talent as an excuse).

1.2. What is leadership – what should we learn?

But even if it is in principle possible to learn leadership, how do we know what to learn?

This depends of course on what we think leadership is. The fact that there are many different programs on offer is alone testimony to the fact that there is no agreement on the true definition of leadership.

Again, this has been studied over and over. Some see a clear time line, with a kind of progression in types of leadership theory and practice over time which often assumes that they get better as time passes by.

One way to look for an answer is to look for common denominators across large volumes of literature. (And there is a lot – amazon.com carries 250,000 titles with the word management in the title). Actually there are some things that keep turning up in studies. An early attempt to sum up the state of the art found only one common trait that was common across studies. Leaders are above average in intelligence.²

² But according to Desjardins (2003) leaders are not the smartest in the workforce. Specialists are smarter.
Hales (1986, 2001) found close to a dozen common aspects of leadership among many studies. These were

1. Acting as figurehead
2. Liaison; the formation and maintenance of contacts
3. Monitoring, filtering and disseminating information
4. Allocating resources
5. Handling disturbances and maintaining work flows
6. Negotiating
7. Innovating
8. Planning
9. Controlling and directing subordinates

This is probably not the whole story, but it is something. A “job description” such as this is however not always helpful in knowing what to do in specific situations. Another attempt was made by Mintzberg (1973) who drew on both Fayol (1916/1930) and Carlson (1951) and measured how much time is actually spent on different activities and concluded that a manager acts in different “roles”.

In my own research I have asked leaders what they think is needed to do their job. They give different answers. They differ in terms of what you need to know, which seems to depend on what kind of business or organisation you lead. More common across answers is attitudes that you need to like people.

I also performed a statistical analysis of skill levels for 16 skills in a survey among managers; it was hard to find latent factors that summarized what leaders feel skilful at. Except perhaps for a kind of people-related skill summarizing things like managing others, oral presentations and so on.

So it seems there may be many different skills you might need as a manager, perhaps depending on what you are a manager of in terms of what the organisation does. And in addition to this a people skill component of some kind.

However this is enough to know what to aim for in leadership training in terms of the curriculum. There are some technical and legal things such as accounting and financial topics. There are some common organisational processes that you need to know about. Like logistics or marketing. This is reflected in business school curriculum.

And in addition to this there is a large and important part which is about dealing with people – the self and others, and the relationship between the two

In terms of general leadership programs they tend either to offer skills or know how regarding subjects that are to do with these common processes in organisations. Or they focus on the human aspect of this. Or both.

The interesting thing with MiL’s MEC program is that it aims to attract people who already have a good understanding of organisational processes from experience of being managers. They already know their business so to speak. But MiL aims to use this to develop the person’s ways of dealing with people, including themselves.
This is an area where MiL has a very developed concept with several important aspects, such as

- relationships,
- communication,
- handling of anxiety,
- perspective taking,
- reflection
- responsibility versus power.

Another important result from my own research is that managers spend most of their time in different types of meetings (about 70%) and only little time at their desk (30%) (see also Tengblad, 2006). Deskwork is basically about preparing or following up on meetings. This observation also has consequences for my view of leadership.

This leads up to the next issue – what can be learned?

2. SKILLS AS THEY ARE LEARNED

Even if there is no defined list of skills or knowledge that you simply need to be a good leader, there seems to be a pattern in terms of how management and leadership skills are learned.

In my research I surveyed managers who attended leadership programs about how much of what they know or can that comes from learning in the programs. Then I tried to find patterns in the answers. In statistics this is done with a factor analysis. The result is shown below.3

3 The data consists of 16 issues of which all were used and contributed to the factor analysis, which was done in two types of analytical software using slightly different modelling techniques (SPSS and Lisrel; Exploratory and confirmatory analysis, using different type of matrices). Both yielded the same result. Here for graphical purposes the solution is based on the strongest items contributing to the respective factors.
Managers sort their learning of skills into two main categories. One is about cognition and one is about people (or interperson skills as it is termed in the picture).

The first of these, cognition, seem to relate to knowing about facts, analytical tools and so on (declarative knowledge). This is know-how in terms of doing financial analysis, knowing what logistics or marketing is all about and so on. But it is more than that. It is also the ability to expand this know-how, learning more.

The second type of skill contribution is related to people skills. This is about how you relate to other persons in the organisation, which is a distinctly different type of learning.

This learning comes about in different ways. Both interviews and statistical analysis show that making and writing paper assignments is a very powerful way to achieve cognitive contribution, whereas learning from peers is very influential for interperson skills contribution. Interestingly both are possible to influence through lectures, even if this is much less powerful.

A final crucial question is what this learning brings the manager and their organisations. The short answer is that cognition contribution is more related to the manager’s career such as salary, getting better (higher) jobs and more responsibility. The people skills contribution is more related to organisational results, for instance bonuses and sales. This is related to innovative processes, which use the resources of many people in concerted action.

This does not mean that you can see these as completely separate, they overlap to some extent. For instance there is – at least on average – a relationship between individual achievement as a manager and organisational gains.
3. SKILLS AS THEY ARE USED – HOW LEADERSHIP LEARNING CREATES RESULTS

So there are two types of skills development. And they both are significantly related to results that matter for organisational performance. Even if there is little research examining this on an organisational and individual level, the evidence is clear and supported through both qualitative and quantitative scientific approaches.

But this is not enough. Knowing that there is a relationship to results and what kind of educational measures they relate to is of course important. But to understand how this happens is also crucial.

But for this we need a theory, a model that explains how results are achieved in an organisation through letting one single person – a manager – get an education. If we have a good model for this, we can get a better understanding what we should focus on in organisational management development and indeed as individual managers.

At the centre of this is the relationship between a single person and his or her environment, in this case an organisation. Another key is the view of learning in an organisational context. Here I take the view that organisational learning is intimately related to change. In fact it is hard to imagine that someone embarks on a long educational program without some notion of a desire or need for change.

This leads back to some notions from the introduction about how change is inherently related to environment. This can be viewed from different perspectives. There can be a change in the manager, in the environment and in the relationship between them.

Basically this can be viewed in two ways. One is to focus on the parts and their interplay. This is basically the viewpoint of theorists such as Argyris’ and Schön’s view on organisational learning.

Argyris’ & Schön’s (1996) version of organisational learning implies that the knowledge of a manager is what matters most to the learning processes of organisations. A link between the manager and the development of the

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4 In Argyris and Schön (1996) an organization is founded on three basic elements; agreed decision making procedures, delegation of authority to individuals to act on behalf of the collective and boundaries between the collective and the rest of the world. In addition to this, there needs to be rule-governed behavior in the organization. These must not be explicit rules, they can be implicit. There is also the notion of a common goal. Then there is an element of time in relation to goal fulfillment which makes organizations either “ephemeral” (temporary) or “agencies”. The ephemeral organizations seize to exist when goal achievement is reached. The agency does not have an achievable goal in that sense but exist to perform in relation to issues that arise repetitively (Barnard, 1938/1971). Agencies work on a continuing basis. Therefore any extrinsic value must be created in interaction with others, regardless if the benefits are seen as belonging to the individual (in the form of e.g. a salary) or the organization (in the form of e.g. earnings). After first having found that organizations can hold knowledge (by serving as environments holding knowledge; in the minds of individuals, files which record actions, decisions, regulations and polices and maps and physical objects that imbeds knowledge, i.e. serves recollection) or represent knowledge, Argyris and Schön go on to find that there is a Deweyan process of inquiry in the organization and elaborates their two learning loops. Argyris and Schön imply that a manager has the potential to play a larger role than other members of the organizations. As any other member she can contribute to organizational learning (which comes in three types and is influenced by inquiry into these types; (1) organizational inquiry into improved performance, (2)
organisation is implicit in their model, but it is not entirely evident as to how it functions (other than that managers acts on behalf of others through voluntary transfer of power).

But theirs is a view where manager and organisation are separate but related. Another view could follow along the lines of John Dewey who saw the person and the environment as a system. Both views are valid. Depending on which view one takes, the unit of analysis is different and there is something to be learned from using both perspectives.

Here I will however for analytical purposes use a view where the manager is one agent and the organisation another. I will deal with the evident fact that the manager is also part of the organisation by treating this as the relationship between manager and organisation.

So in this analysis there are three key pieces

- The manager
- The organisation (in whole or parts)
- The relationship between them

The advantage of this is that all three can be observed and analysed. There is a large literature investigating the relationship between individual and organisation – often measured as the degree of fit between the two (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Fit can be defined as compatibility between person and job, person and group, person and supervisor or person and organisation. The level of fit is correlated to a number of important aspects of organisations. First of all the intent to quit (i.e. the employees intention to change jobs) is negatively correlated to fit between person and environment. This is also seen in terms of turnover (i.e. how many persons an organisation loses and recruits over time) which is similarly negatively associated with fit. Tenure (i.e. how long each employee stayed with the organisation) was consequently instead positively associated with fit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Intent to leave</th>
<th>Turnover</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Overall performance</th>
<th>Contextual performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependents</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Job</td>
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<td>n.a.</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Group</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Organisation</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Supervisor</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman et al. (2005)

inquiry into the definition of improved performance and (3) inquiry into enhanced capacity of doing (1) and (2)). But managers are in a better position than regular members to this as they have “delegation of authority to act on behalf of the collective”. If the manager is influenced, the organization is likely to be influenced. And thus it is that management learning (influencing the manager’s skills, attitudes etc) can potentially lead to organizational learning.
In addition to this performance measures also turn out to be positively associated with organisational fit.

With regard to quitting the job I found in my study that the largest determinant of whether managers stay with their employer after graduating from long leadership programs, such as MiL or an MBA, was the degree of fit. The rest of the organisation, and in particular superiors, has a lot of influence on whether managers stay afterwards.

But the key here is that leadership development must address all three aspects. To learn to deal with the relationship is therefore important as well.

3.1. The reflective process in groups

Imagine the perfect steady state in an organisation. You have a work process going which has been fine tuned and can be repeated over and over to produce identical results. A filling line in a milk dairy. A credit approval system in a bank. A bio analytical work flow in a hospital lab. It works on individual and collective routines.

The efficiency of such processes is an essential contribution to wealth in society. But they don’t last forever. At some point something happens. A competitor invents a new way of distributing milk or a consumer movement lowers demand. There is a financial crisis, or someone invents a better and cheaper test for a disease. Or a lab nurse questions a step in the system. This is when learning needs to come in.

John Dewey (1910/1933) took this as the starting point for a reflective process. He saw learning as a process which starts when old habits no longer works for whatever reason. Only then is there need for change. This prompts a process of thought. He saw a flow in a process where the stages may come in different order and overlap. Actually he called this a spiral rather than a process. One spiral can lead to another through the concepts it gives rise to as a by-product.
The illustration above is after Miettinen (2000). Dewey called his main book on this “How we think” but he could have added “...and act”. Because activity and thinking are not opposites in his view – they are integrated. Thinking is among other things a way to perform, test and evaluate actions in the mind. This ability is to Dewey essential for the being that man is. Thinking is about action. The result of the process is new routines, solutions. And ideally, but not always, it leads to new ideas and concepts. Dewey notes that these are often the most valuable result. These concepts can be very useful in the future.

Dewey’s spiral has had enormous impact on management and education. But it is mostly known in revised form. For instance it is the inspiration behind Kolb’s learning cycle (Kolb & Fry, 1975, Kolb, 1984).

In relation to Dewey’s original spiral there has been developments. Some, like Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin (2003) has concluded that the process is more elaborate and different for different people. But there are also models which are reductions of the stages in the spiral. This has the advantage of being an easier rule of thumb to remember and apply in real life. Here I will use Merriam and Clark’s (1993) three step model. (This is actually not inspired by Dewey but by the structure of storytelling, but Høyrup (2004) has convincingly argued for its kinship with Dewey).

3.1.1. Separation – initiation – return

This three-step model of the reflection process starts with separation (from the old situation). This is related to what happens when habits, previous ways of behaving seems not to work anymore. The old ways and the situation are separated by some kind of change. This can occur for different reasons. One possibility is that a new situation presents itself. Another possibility may be that the habits of mind have changed and the old situation or routine no longer seem appropriate. This may happen through insight or experience from other environments. After separation
follows a process where the new and the old is related, which is initiation (into the new). Finally there is return (to the changed, new situation) which involves integration of the old and the new to a new understanding. In this stage action can start.

An important point here is that inquiry is not an individual activity in isolation. Even individual reflection can be seen to involve a transaction between an individual and the environment, seeing the individual as part of this environment. This is for instance the perspective of Dewey’s inquiry and notion of transactions between habits and environment, a process which he calls experience. By definition this process contains mutual transaction with the environment, e.g. persons, places, things and so on. Dewey did not look into organisational development per se, but in discussions about society he proposed as an evaluation criterion for a good society its degree of plurality of interests and purposes and their interplay. Free exchange of ideas and opinion between individuals (and groups) is essential for development and solving problems in this view (Garrison, 1998).

Collective processes of inquiry are however influenced by power and emotions (Raelin, 2001 and Vince 2001) they may also be subject to different kinds of failure, e.g. failing to see that certain known action is not relevant in a new situation. Raelin (2001) point out that individual reflection may be seen merely as the start of a reflective process in public.

So in organisations there are processes like this taking place. They may not be working very well in some and better in other organisations, but they are always potentially possible. How they function is among other things influenced by power structures in the organisation and how this power is exercised. Thus the issue of managerial power and action becomes relevant. In other words it is possible for managers through their communication, behaviour and actions to influence these public inquiry processes. Drawing on this a process of public inquiry can be seen as a potential interface between processes in the organisation and the education of managers.

Unless there is an emotional and cultural climate that encourages honest contribution to these inquiry processes they lose potency, which for instance Argyris and Schöen point out with their use of espoused theory and theory in action. As noted power is one way to influence these processes. Formal authoritarian power may produce results, but cuts off critical contributions to finding choices, which is a very important source for the value of inquiry. It is precisely by using many different suggestions that man is capable of collaborative development far beyond each individual person, similar to Dewey’s notion that plurality is a measure of a good society. The way power is handled and how the relationship between person and organisation works influences the transaction.

3.1.2. The relationship

In other words this inquiry process does not take place in a vacuum. There is a relationship between manager and organisation which will be seen here as a condition for inquiry. If the manager does not fit the organisation for some reason, it is likely that their contribution to inquiry may not occur at all or function badly. This means that change must take place either in the relationship, the organisation or the manager.
As mentioned there are lots of evidence that the relationship or “fit” between person and work environment influence performance (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). In addition to this also performance measures turn out to be positively associated with organisational fit.

The important thing to note here is that the relationship is very important. It can enable results or act as a real deal-breaker for a manager’s performance.

3.2. How skills and learning enter the process

If you ask managers to describe work-situations where they use skills they have learned during programs, they describe a process similar to the one in the picture below. It starts with a feeling or information that something cannot go on as before (separation). This can be a sudden insight or someone telling the manager that a process works badly. It can be a new idea or a problem. Then there is some kind of discussion around this (initiation starts). How and what type depends on how many are involved and in what way (is it e.g. a formal meeting or an unplanned encounter at the coffee machine between three colleagues). This sparks memory to some similar or related notion that the manager has experienced before. Sometimes this is investigated (e.g. a phone call, looking up a reference). This notion is the manager’s contribution. This then leads to some kind of resolution of the problem (return). Sometimes more general learning points are made.

*Inquiry process described in the interviews (interpretation)*

It is important to note that this is a group process, even if the type of group varies. As mentioned above most managers spend a large majority of their time in meetings with others. It is during these that leadership take place. For instance analysis is made in sessions like these. Very rarely is it a case of a manager who sits alone to design a process and then telling others to do it. And when this happens it often fails in small or large ways.
In organisations there is actually very little “reflection-in-action” and more “reflection-in-session”. Rather, in these sessions reflection becomes action.

Now as mentioned there are two types of skills contribution going on in management learning. There is the cognitive and there is the interperson or people skills development.

These both relate to these reflection processes but in different ways. The cognitive has to do with the manager’s ability to make a good individual contribution to the collective effort (part A of the process). The people skills development is about enabling the whole process (B).

A manager, who cannot influence the whole process by making it work better, will at best only be a very good co-worker.

On the other hand in order to contribute and gain respect among co-workers, it is important to have insights of relevance to the issues that the organisation deal with. Management is therefore context dependent. It is a function of an organisation rather than a profession of its own right.5

You need relevant cognitive skills as well as people skills to be a leader.

This explains why cognition development is statistically related to individual results such as salary increase and bigger jobs. It is a reward for good individual contribution. But it also explains why people skills development is statistically related to bonus and organisational value added – it relates to making the inquiry processes that create value in the organisation more efficient.

5 And this is why you very seldom see managers changing industries in a radical way from say being a soccer manager to head of a general hospital. Within business top managers change business but mostly since they have bureaucratic skills which are similar across companies, such as managing the process of dealing with stakeholders relevant to listed companies.
**Bad relationships kill improvements**

What can really spoil this is when there is bad fit between manager and organisation. In the context of management and leadership programs this can be seen in the degree of implementation of change after graduation.

The graduates who report that there is a good follow up after graduation from the program are twice as likely to implement valuable change processes in the organisation.

They also stay much longer and make a better career. The difference is very noticeable. Among those who reported that there was a bad follow up, only 30% were still employed by their sponsor organisation after five years. The group who reported a good follow up had 80% still active after five years. The absolute mean was 50%, so the normal “half life” of these managers were five years.

In other words: in cases where participants return to their organisation and are expected to go on as if they did not learn anything relevant during the programs, there is normally problems. Often the manager leaves.

4. WHY IT WORKS TO ATTEND A MiL PROGRAM, TESTIMONIALS

This brings me to the issue of how MiL can be understood to deliver value to the organisations of their program attendants.

In my research MiL (i.e. MEC, MiL’s programme for experienced managers) is different in two crucial and related respects from the standard executive MBA programs.

MiL attracts a slightly older and more senior group of managers. Basically they are one notch higher in hierarchy than those attending MBA programs. This is partly by design of the target group – the program is designed for more senior managers. The content is much more focused on bringing the people skills kind of development rather than the cognitive kind. This is attractive to this more senior group of managers, because most of them already proved their cognitive capacity. Their potential lies in improving how they enable the collective inquiry processes in their organisations.

The key ingredient is that MiL helps them to develop the courage to listen and, importantly act on what they hear, which make people in the organisation contribute better. Their normally well developed cognitive abilities keep the process relevant and organisationally useful.

Here is some testimony from MiL graduates regarding the application of different skills.

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6 Self selection of participants to education is an important theme in research, and seems to be in play here.
A better listener …

A very basic and yet underestimated part of leadership is true and focused listening. That this is seen as both hard to apply and very useful is illustrated by the following.

“I probably have a softer approach now, if you put it like that. Maybe a better listener. Don’t point with the whole hand7 as you used to (laugh). And I got some indications [about this] from those around me. […] Yes, no but I had some of my closest colleagues who say that I am a different person. Especially one of them has said it very clearly and he does a much better job now as well which is a positive insight for me as a boss, so…” Male MiL graduate 1

“Everything isn’t like you think it is. We are very influenced by our childhood and upbringing and what we carry in our Rucksack. If I, as a leader, am not interested in people, then I can’t lead. In other words I have to see the person… and not a machine…well, actually when you work with cars you do have to listen to the sound of the engine, and so you must listen to the person as well. So it is perhaps the same; to know how to make it work, you must listen and oil it or whatever it is for it to run better.” Female MiL graduate 1

Responsibility versus power

“I have learned to listen as well on other people. […] Oh, I can think it, say to myself. Sometimes it is better not to say what you think, actually. A bit more mindful, think ahead, before. And then I talk less in groups and listen more. Before I usually declared my view early on… and then… If you take my group, you know, it gets hard for them to say their view if they have a different opinion… so now I have a more holding-back attitude.. to.. think that they may even have a point (laughs).” Male MiL Graduate 1.

Here it is about the listening. If you are a manager it is very important to ensure that people can make their contribution to the ever evolving improvement spirals. This builds on honest genuine listening.

To become a listener is not easy. It involves being confident that you can trust the ability of others. This comes from a certain level of cognitive knowledge and self confidence.

Daring to trust

Learning about and trusting the ability of others is an important element that is foundational to creative reflection processes.

“I came here (to this job) without much knowledge about the content, but I have to create a management team that I can trust and that can trust me. I have a Head of Construction. I must trust that he knows about that… a project manager, trust that he knows that. But I need to know what it is about at least up to a point, so that I am credible as a manager. But I can

7 Idiomatic expression to the meaning of “being very assertive”.

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never go into all the details but act so that you get credibility. This is no specific for this position, but for all manager positions. Same thing when I was market manager, its about helping them become good. You need to know enough to be a speaking partner.” Male MiL Graduate 2

[…]At the deskwork I have perhaps fallen back to the old…but maybe a bit about this thing with good enough. Keep it short and simple in a way. […] for instance now if someone comes with a calculation on a job, that I can question a bit, what the hell is it checked for quality, this calculation, I can wonder, you know. But OK good enough for a decision. And then I let it go…and others can say to me ‘we have been over this enough now’ and then I can let it go, so there.” Male MiL graduate 1

From specialised to general view

Trusting the skills of others frees up focus on process issues.

“I got confirmation that a boss doesn’t need to know everything. Some of my colleagues thinks it is hell to be on top, to read and know everything. I didn’t really do it before and this was strengthened. I have experts and its better to let them shine and develop and to learn more and outshine themselves. I simply don’t care about details like I used to. I leave it completely to them, I leave… I take care to say what the goal is… I just don’t say I want this and this done, I want this and this done because I will use it for…and then they know how to tackle it. I state the task and the goal for me and then you have to handle it by yourself and a deadline.. I want it like this, e.g. in writing.. Then I leave it and I don’t care how they do it. So I leave it to them.. I don’t manage as much as before..well really I manage more now but in a different way.. I leave it completely to them… ‘and when can you be finished?’..well…the 23rd OK. Then I will expect it by the 23rd and it looks like this and it is up to them. Before I used to cut in and check. ‘Well, how far are you?’ and ‘Don’t forget that’ and I don’t do that now.” Female MiL graduate 1

This is partly down to having the trust in yourself, self-respect and self-confidence. This is well documented in learning theory up to a point where it is sometimes seen as the only take away from programs. It isn’t, but it is nonetheless an important part. More interesting is that while listing requires confidence and insight, even just performing some of the techniques that you learn at MiL is very useful for facilitating a listening environment.

Design skills - openness in meetings

Participants report that they have picked up a set of tools or design skills, that can be used specifically to facilitate processes.

“When I have meetings I use it a bit, the meetings where I can influence it myself. I try to use this thing with landing; I try to help people land. Find out if they bring lots of stuff from home, if they are divorcing or if the house burned down, you know, if they are present or not. It can be useful for the

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8 And some of this seems to come form the opportunity that the participants get to benchmark themselves against peers from other organisation, and realising that their own ability is well on par with that of their peers.
others to know. [...] and then I run some reflection after the meeting as well where they can air their views on the meeting as such, you know, what was good, what was bad and is there something we need to change and so on. So I use that.” [...] 

What listening can lead to apart from an increased information and better analysis, is shared knowledge and platforms from which to act.

Design skills– shared knowledge and participation

“How do I create a process so I get [information] and understand what everybody thinks so that I can form my opinion? If we are about to make a decision, how do I make as many as possible in on it? So that we don’t make a decision but seventy per cent will do everything to resist it, because they have not realised why we must make a decision. [...] You gather information. Ideally you want everybody in the group to stand on the same platform. And see the information in a similar way. From there it should be easy to make a decision. And since everybody is standing on the same platform and are in on the decision, they back it up. And then...then I rarely take my decision on beforehand but it comes out of these steps along the way... and if we then make a decision based on for instance profitability, well yes then it’s the best. Then I know, and I never need to be worried or manipulate either.” Male MiL graduate 2

Design skills – new ideas and innovation

“Let’s say we want to make it [an organisation] more cost effective. Then you sit with one picture in the head and I have one picture. And you try to push in the direction of yours and I do the opposite. Then, if you invite others in, maybe, and really listen to them, it becomes something else from what it would have been otherwise, which is very different and unstoppable”. Female MiL graduate 1

Design skills – reflection

Much if this boils down to learning to reflect.

“. The leadership issue...gave insights about the leadership and what it takes and all that which is not possible to get through the analytical. I think it is needed to. Leadership does not offer everything but it has that part which is needed to make a grey [person] be something beyond the usual, I think... It was a very positive experience. This whole thing with living an intense life, both privately and on the job-level. To just be able to pick yourself out of the every day situation and reflect on your own situation... and to do it in that environment, they are very good at building that environment...You saw the pattern afterwards, that they were good at getting all the components in the environment. The learning does not come without the environment and the environment you couldn’t get if one hadn’t taken a certain amount of steps to build a group and create trust and so on. You saw it as you went along the journey...that it just doesn’t happen by itself.” Male EXEC
The results in the organisation are large and important. It means that the organisation can now take new and directions and be much more flexible.

**Courage to handle uncertainty**

Trust and design skills helps build courage to handle uncertainty.

"What has happened is that I dare to start processes without knowing how they will turn out. To go into processes [...] to enter them and say, 'things will work out along the way'." Male MiL Graduate 2.

**Results**

It is through design of collective reflective process and the personal contributions of the managers that results are created. Statistical analysis has proven this, but here is a qualitative assessment as well.

"And results then.. well I would like to say that I make my colleagues achieve much more now than before. By acting in a different way. They take a hell of a lot of responsibility now in a way that feels…and on top of that.. I have let go of control a bit. Before I had a hell of a need for control. Somehow [now] when they have taken responsibility I let it go, so then you got it, and I don’t call and check it up. Then they do it. So in terms of results I am convinced I have reached further. I get feedback from my new boss. Big feedback where he praises this.[...] I can actually measure this in figures.. Customer index and staff satisfaction index. I get much better numbers. I am up about 20%. I can measure it. There is a much more positive attitude to my leadership. I can measure it in results as well…I can say that if I look at last years results. But then we lowered costs with X % last year. Without adjustments for index increase and that’s real money and this is what the others say. [...] Then how large part is the program; part of it I would think.[...] It’s more through my way of acting and being. It’s the others that make it happen. Hm..I would think 30-40% is the program.”,

Male EXEC

To sum up there is evidence from qualitative interviews that support the statistical relationships to results and learning from the analysis. In MiL’s case this evidence center around interpersonal development. The reason is that the program both attracts participants which identify these needs in themselves. Of course the focus of the program is exactly to handle such themes.

In the view I have taken management or leadership is about eliciting effort and contributions from different groups of people in an organisation. If the leader cannot do this, he or she is merely another staff member (albeit perhaps a productive one). This facilitating activity is strengthened by MiL. MiL contributes with

- confidence in the ability of the participant himself/herself
- the insight and trust that other people in the organisation can contribute
- the insight and techniques/tools to enable this contribution (among which those strengthening active listening is central).

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9 Similar to the view of Anselm Strauss' notion of social worlds.
This is manifest in how projects and processes are managed, which is associated to documented organisational results\(^\text{10}\). In more dry terms this could be called “process leadership skills”.

5. ELEMENTS THAT MAKE MiL WORK

MiLs aim is to design learning processes and to install this ability on their participants. The pedagogy is built around coaching processes and projects in which real world issues are resolved using theoretical models. This way experience and theory interact to build results.

Important elements that are targeted in this process were mentioned before, and are
- relationships,
- communication,
- handling of anxiety,
- perspective taking,
- reflection,
- responsibility versus power.

MiL provides first hand experience that builds up the confidence of the manager to trust and improve reflective group processes that are crucial for organisational results. They become better listeners, and this is probably often an important start. This is much harder than it sounds.

To truly listen requires respect for the skills of the other, and trust in their judgement. It also means being able let the contributions of others influence decisions and processes. Especially for those managers who built their careers on good individual performance (perhaps in competition with others) this is a fundamental shift. It is likely to mean shifting perspectives to the responsibility side of a formal position from a power perspective. Power may work to strangle innovative group process.

Thus there is an important element of courage involved in a decision to really listen and being prepared to act on the views of others.

But there is more than that. Based on a willingness to invite others these processes can be designed. Examples of this were given in the qualitative interviews. That meetings start with making sure everyone is mentally on board; being mindful that the highest ranking in a group may kill ideas by stating their own views early on. Allowing for discussing on how the meetings as such work. Note that all this can be done in both formal and informal, both large and small, meetings.

This creates openness which is important for others to share knowledge and information, which increase the possibilities of innovative solutions.

\(^{10}\) This is based on the statistical analysis and qualitative interviews. Organisational results are however hard to evaluate in terms of cause and effect, since there are normally a number of contributors and factors related to the result. Organisational politics and power may influence documentation and espoused theory about such results in interviews.
In short the MiL approach in terms of their program for experienced managers is based on recruiting participants that already are good at contributing as individuals in the sense that they know their business and have the necessary skills as professionals in their domains – they can draw on their experience. (Circle A in the inquiry process). But to this MiL improves and create skills and insights necessary to improve the inquiry process as a whole. This is essentially what makes the program work and deliver.

In short: This is how leadership learning creates results in organisations.
Citerade arbeten


