

A Conceptual Framework for Developing Self-Awareness as a Leader

John Edward Jarvis, DBA

Walden University,

Abstract: This paper presents a proposed conceptual model for developing self-awareness as a leader based on the skills-based leadership theory. The proposed model should provide organizational and human resources leaders, as well as organizational effectiveness practitioners with the ability to develop the organizations' leadership development practices as a driver of competitive advantage. This proposed conceptual model bridges a gap in literature related to understanding how leaders develop and apply self-awareness through self-evaluation, reflection, and the subsequent link to organizational performance.

Keywords: Self-awareness, self-reflection, learning and growth, organizational performance, skills-based leadership theory

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The aim of this paper is to explore the linkage between leader self-awareness, self-reflection, learning and growth and organizational (business) performance to develop a conceptual model to improve business performance and for future research. The theoretical framework used to guide the process of analysis in this paper was the skills-based leadership theory. As applied to leader self-awareness, the skills-based leadership theory emphasizes the importance of understanding and applying social judgment skills, by leaders, to the success of an organization, as well as people in the organization through the lens of social systems (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000).

At the heart of being a good leader is understanding yourself as a gateway to understanding others. Self-awareness is an interconnected, reciprocal process developed through relationships with others and within the context of individualized purpose that emerges through personal application and experience (Hart, 2017). Self-awareness provides a leader with the ability to understand how their personality, beliefs, behaviors, personal goals, and actions impact others (Daud, 2020). Self-awareness is critical in understanding how to appreciate differences and unique talents of others, as well as the importance of differences others bring to your team. Moreover, exercising leadership influences business and individual performance (Knies, Jacobsen, & Tummers, 2016). Therefore, self-awareness is a critical gateway to effectively leading others to achieve desired organizational performance and business outcomes.

A recent study of managers found a positive relationship between leader self-reflection competence and organizational (business) performance, as well as organizational commitment of employees (Samul, 2024). Reflection provides a powerful method to translate experiences into learning (Hallenbeck, 2017). Conversely, Castelli (2016) suggested despite growing interest in the practice of self-reflection by leaders, there is dearth guidance on applying reflection.

Continuous learning & growth, reflection, and the ability to apply those insights through experiential and programmatic activities, are critical to leader effectiveness. Hallenbeck (2017) suggested individuals, including leaders, who are learning agile display a willingness and capacity to learn from experience, as well as effectively apply that knowledge when faced with new and challenging circumstances. Growth mindset, or an openness to learning, is an essential capability for leaders and practitioners seeking to enable their organizations to be resilient and adaptive (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Therefore, leaders should develop and apply knowledge, insight, and skills derived through an ongoing cycle of self-evaluation, including continuous learning, reflection, and application in new and challenging situations.

II. LINKING THEORY, ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE, AND SELF-AWARENESS WITH LEARNING & GROWTH MINDSET

Gaining insights and social judgment skills as a leader from experience requires purposeful effort in personal reflection, seeking feedback, and applying those insights (Hallenbeck, 2017) in continuous learning (Maxwell, 2022). Leader practices may effectively provide line of sight and link organizational, group, and individual activities with the organization's strategic goals and performance outcomes (Buller & McEvoy, 2012), as well as affect employee commitment and trust (Asencio, 2016). Heifetz, et al. (2009) suggested an openness and commitment to learning and growth are essential capabilities for adaptive leaders. Furthermore, learning from experience requires reflecting on that experience (Samul, 2024), as well as applying lessons-learned in a continuous cycle (Hallenbeck, 2017). However, Maxwell (2023) indicated many leaders lack self-awareness and do not clearly know their purpose, strengths, or weaknesses. The skills-based leadership model provides the theoretical lens through which understanding how leaders develop and apply effective social judgment skills, including self-awareness, self-evaluation, reflection, continuous learning, and the subsequent link to organizational performance.

2.1 Skills-based Leadership Model

The skills-based leadership model proposed by Mumford, et al. (2000) suggested leadership as a kind of skilled performance, including social judgment. Northouse (2019) suggested social judgment skills provide leaders with the capacity to understand how their principles relate to others. Furthermore, leaders who have developed social judgment or human skills tend to build an environment where employees sense security and comfort, as well as experience involvement and encouragement (Northouse, 2019). Moreover, Zaccaro, Mumford, Connelly, Marks, and Gilbert (2000) indicated social judgment skills represent the capability to understand social systems, as well as people. Conversely, Northouse (2019) indicated the skills-based leadership model did not describe how competencies, including social judgment skills produce essential leadership outcomes.

2.2 Organizational (Business) Performance

Marketplaces are increasingly competitive, fragmented, and disruptive forcing organizations to rapidly respond to gain, and maintain competitive advantage, including achieving performance goals through effectively utilizing available resources throughout the organization. Ibrahim and Daniel (2019) found a positive relationship between effective leadership and organizational, or business, performance. Furthermore, they posited improving leadership capabilities lead to improved organizational performance outcomes and productivity (Ibrahim & Daniel, 2019). Nasomboon (2014) suggested organizational performance and value, as well as employee engagement are directly influenced by leader commitment. Leaders affect organizational talent and strategic capacity which are necessary to deliver results and attributes competing organizations do not possess (Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011) leading to improved organizational performance and competitive advantage (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade & Drake, 2009). Superior organizational, or business, performance may be consequent on linking key goals and action plans to organizational capabilities, culture, group competencies, individual knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), motivation, and opportunity (Buller & McEvoy, 2012).

2.3 Leader Self-Awareness

Frémeaux and Pavageau (2022) defined leaders' self-awareness as a search for consistency between the practice of leadership activity, how leaders are perceived, and leadership activities practiced, who they are internally, and how they are perceived externally. Moreover, Carden, Jones, and Passmore (2022) suggested, "self-awareness consists of a range of components, which can be developed through focus, evaluation, and feedback, and provides an individual with an awareness of their internal state (emotions, cognitions, physiological responses), that drives their behaviors (beliefs, values and motivations) and an awareness of how this impacts and influences others externally" (p.164). Frequently, leaders lack awareness of their unconscious biases and tendencies to perceive some sensory stimuli and ignore others (Densten & Gray, 2001). Eurich (2018) concluded leaders may benefit from self-knowledge through learning and building both internal and external self-awareness. Therefore, leaders should seek to understand their internal state, as well as how their actions, values, and perceptions are perceived by others through self-evaluation.

2.3.1 Internal self-awareness

Internal self-awareness encompasses how accurately we discern our values, passions, and aspirations, as well as how congruent they are with our environment, reactions and influence on others (Eurich, 2018). Furthermore, Carden et al., (2022) described dimensions of self-awareness that included intrapersonal perspective, or self-knowledge that focuses on a person's internal state. Hart (2017) proffered, in part, effective leader self-awareness involves understanding personal values, purpose, and how their decisions impact others, as well as organizational performance.

2.3.2 External self-awareness

Eurich (2018) defined external self-awareness as comprehending how other people regard us. Eurich further suggested that people who are aware of others' perceptions tend to show greater empathy and understanding of others' perspectives. External self-awareness was described by Carden et al., (2022) as an individual's interpersonal dimension, or public self-consciousness, including knowledge of one's social self and impact on others. Employees who work with a leader who can see themselves as their employees do, tend to be more satisfied in their relationship with their leader, as well as see that leader as more effective (Eurich, 2018).

2.4 Leader Learning and Growth

Leaders must seek to continuously learn and grow through experiential events and circumstances, as well as apply learning during their leadership journey. Jarvis and Williams (2017) indicated leader continuous learning and the ability to make course corrections are important aspects for achieving organizational, or business outcomes. De Meuse, Dai, Swisher, Eichinger, and Lombardo (2012) described learning and doing as entwined, and leaders' learning activities emerged in response to lessons created by dealing with crucial incidents that might include ambivalent outcomes, consequences of actions, important opportunities, and problems. Furthermore, leaders who are learning agile excel at applying experiential learning to perform effectively in new and challenging situations (Hellenbeck, 2017). A leader must adjust to a wide range of tasks and social outcomes that influence the leader's perception and performance due to reflection and self-assessment (Dinh & Lord, 2012). Consequently, Hart (2017), suggested experiential learning in conjunction with the influence of others' responses, coupled with self-assessment enabled self-evaluation and application of lessons learned. Leaders must adjust to ongoing changes in the course of their duties, requiring ongoing learning and adaptability which are crucial leadership outcomes (Jarvis & Williams, 2017).

III. LEARNING AND GROWTH MINDSET

In leading self, leaders must lead based on their values and principles, understand their strengths and weaknesses, as well as seek opportunities to learn from experiential setbacks and implement personal changes. Leaders with a growth mindset believe capabilities can be cultivated in themselves, as well as others (Dweck, 2016). Connors (2021) suggested to effectively lead others and grow personally requires a leader understand, in part, their purpose and values to achieve their goals, and realize passion in what matters most to them. Conversely, Connors indicated it is difficult to look inward and assess and understand ourselves, including our motivations. Leaders should ask for feedback and use the feedback for self-improvement, as well as continuously seek the opportunity to learn (Koohang, Paliszkievicz, & Goluchowski, 2017). Park and Kim (2018) indicated supportive leadership behaviors, as well as interpersonal trust and a culture of knowledge sharing are antecedents of effective organizational learning.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) proposed transforming experience into learning as an outcome of combining experience, reflective processes, and outcomes or actions. Moreover, advantages of reflection based on experiential learning may be lost if not connected to commitment and action (Boud et al., 1985). Kolb (1984) characterized experiential learning as a four-step cycle, including: a) concrete experience, b) reflective observation, c) abstract conceptualization, and d) active experimentation. Moreover, Morris (2020) suggested effective experiential learning should include practical testing and real-world application.

3.1 Learning Agility

Leaders must learn and apply lessons learned to be flexible and adapt their behaviors, and leadership approaches to everchanging situations and challenges. As previously noted, Hellenbeck (2017) suggested individuals, including leaders, who are learning agile display a willingness and capacity to learn from experience, as well as effectively apply that knowledge when faced with new and challenging circumstances. De Meuse (2017) described learning agility as the ability to learn from experience, as well as the inclination to apply those lessons in novel and challenging leadership situations and roles. Moreover, De Meuse (2019) found a positive relationship between learning agility and leader

performance. Continuous learning which facilitates the ability to make ongoing changes of direction are important capabilities for organizational leaders to achieve positive business outcomes (Jarvis, 2016).

3.2 Developing Knowledge, Insight, and Skill as a Leader

Developing knowledge gained through experiential learning, discovering insights about self and our impact on others, as well as identifying evolving needed capabilities are critical for leader self-awareness and effectiveness. Mumford et al. (2000) asserted knowledge acquired through experiential learning was critical in how leaders define and solve problems, assess constraints, and implement goals. Leaders may develop insight about themselves and their impact on others through adapting learning to new challenges and situations (Hellenbeck, 2017). Leadership skills are broadly categorized to include technical, human, and conceptual skills, and development of these skills are, in part, a function of experience and environmental influences (Northouse, 2019).

3.3 Applying Learning as a Leader

Self-awareness is developed and applied in the course of leadership practice, including periods of personal and organizational change and transformation; not merely through self-assessment, reflection or introspection (Hart, 2017). The cognitive and behavior changes needed for developing leader self-awareness require double loop learning. Auqui-Caceres and Furlan (2023) described double loop learning as a learning process that incontrovertibly involves modifying core values, beliefs, and assumptions, hence cognitive changes evidenced by observable behavioral changes. Furthermore, De Meuse et al. (2012) suggested learning and doing as being intertwined, and leaders' learning emerged in response to lessons created by dealing with critical incidents, as well as uncertain outcomes, consequences of actions, meaningful opportunities, and problems. Conversely, some characteristics of expertise are intrinsic and considered unteachable; however, capabilities, such as problem-solving, social judgment, and knowledge, can be acquired by the learner through active learning (Germain, 2012). Moreover, Parrish (2023) asserted that people have difficulty learning from decisions, as well as situational outcomes. To counter this tendency, Parrish suggested keeping a record, such as a journal, to make the decision learning process visible to yourself and transparent to others. Knowledge acquired through experience and experiential learning was critical in how leaders define problems, evaluate constraints, and implement plans (Mumford et al., 2000), suggesting the importance of gaining knowledge, insight through reflection, and skill development (Hollenbeck, 2017), as well as observable theory-in-use changes in actions or activities (Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023).

3.4 Importance of Personal Reflection as a Leader

Boud et al. (1985) indicated reflection is a critical activity in which people regain their experience, cogitate on and evaluate it. Furthermore, reflection permits individuals, including leaders, to make conscious and engaged decisions about learning (Boud et al., 1985). McCarthy and Milner (2013) concluded, in part a manager, or leader, should be self-aware and reflective to minimize potentially ethical issues and role conflict in leading. Walger, Roglio, and Abib (2016) suggested reflection-in-action increased self-knowledge and contributed to broadened view of organization, as well as individual and organizational learning. Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, and Staats (2021) indicated learning-by-doing combined with reflection led to significantly better performance than learning-by-doing by itself. Senge (2006) suggested an organizational culture that combines action and reflection makes better decisions that are more readily accepted, as well as helps its people achieve a more positive mental state when dealing with issues in the organizational environment.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Building on the previous discussion a conceptual framework of developing and applying self-awareness as a leader is proposed in Figure 1.

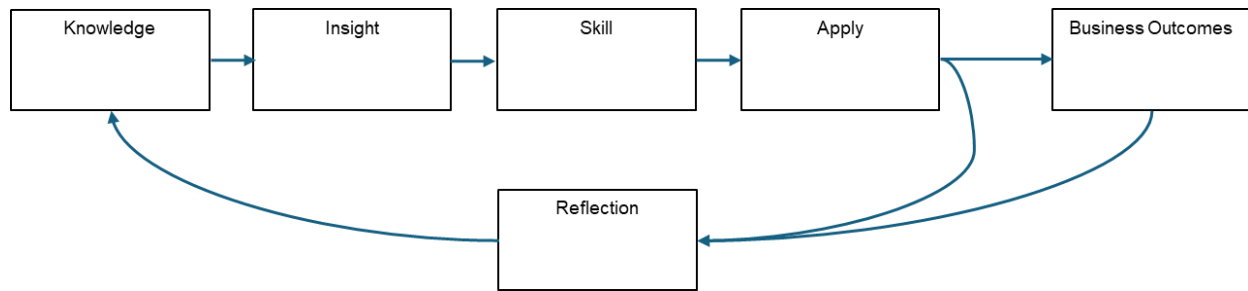


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of developing and applying self-awareness as a leader.

The elements depicted in Figure 1 include (a) knowledge gained through experiential learning, (b) insights discovered about internal self and external impact on others, (c) identification of needed leader skills, or competencies, (d) applying knowledge, insights, and skills in the course of actions and events, (e) monitor and evaluate the impact on business outcomes and actions related to employee engagement, including trust and achieving business outcomes, (f) purposeful reflection of cognitive and behavior changes through an ongoing cycle via a double loop learning process. The proposed developing and applying self-awareness framework illustrates the social judgment skills aspects of the skills-based leadership model in a continuous cycle producing leader self-awareness and essential leadership outcomes. This will subsequently provide organizational and HR leaders, as well as organizational effectiveness practitioners with the ability to develop an organization's internal environment as a driver of competitive advantage (Wang, 2014) while recognizing how developing and applying leader self-awareness produce observable and sustained theory-in-use changes in actions or outcomes (Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023). The elements identified in Figure 1 were consistent with effective leader learning agility outcomes posited by De Meuse (2017, 2019).

V. CONCLUSION

The proposed conceptual framework for developing and applying self-awareness as a leader draws upon extant literature. Additionally, the proposed conceptual framework contributes to the understanding of needed exploration of self-awareness development methods and how self-awareness is developed, in part through self-evaluation and reflection asserted by Carden et al., (2022). Moreover, the proposed conceptual framework may provide specificity to effectively measure how learning agility positively impacts leader outcomes and posited by De Meuse (2019). The primary limitation of the proposed framework is the specificity of a leader self-awareness framework related to developing, applying, and sustaining behavioral and cognitive changes in leaders. The proposed framework is offered as a research tool for exploring the impact of leader self-awareness on employee engagement and business outcomes. The proposed leader self-awareness framework provides a tool which organizational and HR leaders, as well as organizational practitioners can utilize to improve leader effectiveness, employee engagement, and business outcomes to meet planned objectives.

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