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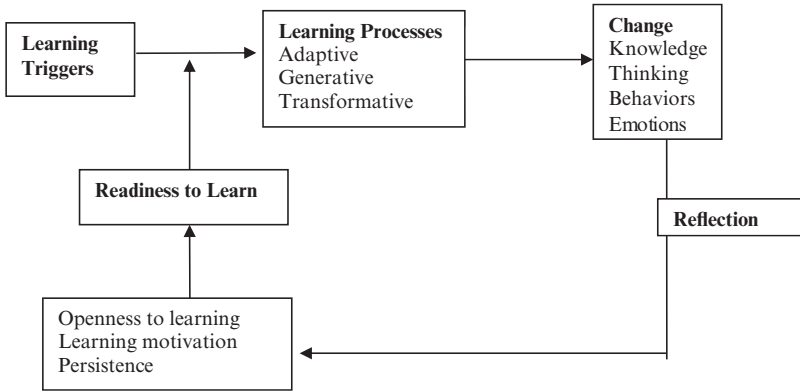
This chapter describes theory and research demonstrating that the experiences students have within student organizations, and the people with whom they interact within those organizations, are powerful triggers for leader learning and development.

Student Organizations as Avenues for Leader Learning and Development

Valerie I. Sessa, Nicole Alonso, Pamela Farago, Gaynell Schettino, Kelcie Tacchi, Jennifer D. Bragger

Higher education institutions are expected to play a role in shaping the country's next generation, not only as active citizens and workers but also as leaders in organizations, communities, and nations (Astin & Astin, 2000; Brubacher & Rudy, 2002; Dewey, 1938, as cited in Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007). Research demonstrates that students increase their leadership knowledge and skills while in college (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and other research—such as the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership—is beginning to determine the high-impact experiences that build student leadership capacity (including sociocultural conversations with peers, mentoring relationships, community service, and membership in off-campus organizations) (Dugan, Kodama, Correia, & Associates, 2013). However, less is known regarding *how* and *why* they are learning and developing these skills during these activities. Although this is a good start to understanding how student leaders develop, more research is needed (Allen & Hartman, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to describe theory and research demonstrating that the experiences students have within student organizations, and the people with whom they interact within those organizations, are powerful triggers for leadership learning and development. Practical applications are then provided based on the (Re)flexion, (A)ssessment, (Ch)allenge, (S)upport (ReAChS) model of leadership development (Sessa, 2017) to help students capitalize on these experiences and make their learning and development more explicit and intentional.

Figure 2.1. Learning Model



Modified with permission from London, M., & Sessa, V.I. (2006). Continuous learning in organizations: A living systems analysis of individual, group, and organization learning. In F. J. Yammarino & F. Dansereau (Eds.), *Research in multi-level issues: Vol. 5. Multi-level issues in social systems* (pp. 123–172). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

What Are Learning and Development?

In this chapter, we employ a learning model proposed by Sessa and London (2005; London & Sessa, 2006), as seen in Figure 2.1. The process of learning requires individuals to broaden their capabilities of (re)structuring their behavior to meet changing conditions, adding new skills and knowledge, and (re)creating themselves to better respond to their environment. These broadened capabilities result in more complex and sophisticated cognitive processes and perceptions of the world, which in turn broaden capabilities. This expanded definition of learning includes what has traditionally been thought of as both learning and development. Learning and development are inextricably tied together (American College Personnel Association, 1996); learning implies gaining new knowledge, skills, behaviors, ways of thinking, and ways of doing whereas development implies growth that leads to maturation and a more complex understanding of the world (Cook-Greuter, 2004).

The three processes that aid in such active learning throughout life are: (a) adaptive learning processes that lead to changes as the result of a stimulus in the environment; (b) generative learning processes geared toward purposefully adding and using new behaviors, knowledge, ways of thinking, feelings, and skills; and (c) transformative learning, or reframing what is known into a broader and more complex understanding in the way the individual sees her or himself and the world. As individuals engage

in these learning processes, their brains change in structure and the ways in which they function (Keeling, Dickson, & Avery, 2011), manifesting in explicit and tacit knowledge, ways of thinking, behaviors, ways of doing, and emotions. Explicit knowledge is formal knowledge that can be readily articulated and verbalized, such as learning leadership theories in a classroom setting (Smith, 2001). Tacit knowledge is practical, action-oriented knowledge, or knowing how to do something without thinking about it (Smith, 2001). For example, a student leader may learn about transformational leadership theory (Avolio, Waldman, & Yammarino, 1991) in class, thus gaining explicit knowledge of leadership. The student can describe transformational leadership theory but may not understand how to engage in transformational leadership. Another student leader may figure out how to inspire her team through trial and error, serendipitously using some characteristics of transformational leadership and thus gaining tacit knowledge, but not realize that this is transformational leadership. In the ideal context, students would learn about transformational leadership in theory as well as have opportunities to engage in transformational leadership in practice.

The learning and development processes are initiated through triggers—pressures, demands, challenges, and opportunities that affect the individual such that he or she cannot continue performing in the same way and be successful (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). When and how a person notices a trigger for learning depends on the individual's readiness to learn (Reichard & Walker, 2016). People vary in their readiness to learn depending on such things as their openness to learning, learning motivation, and level of persistence (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). When there is no trigger for learning and individuals have a low readiness to learn, little learning of any sort will occur, and individuals continue functioning with little change. When there is a trigger for learning, individuals who have low readiness to learn will engage in adaptive learning whereby they change behaviors in response to environmental demands. When there is a high readiness to learn (regardless of the presence of a trigger), individuals may engage in generative learning. In cases where there is both a trigger for learning and a high readiness to learn, individuals may respond with generative learning by adding new behaviors, knowledge, ways of thinking, feelings, and skills or transformative learning by reframing what is known into a broader and more complex understanding in the way the individual sees her or himself and the world (Sessa & London, 2005). However, making changes in knowledge, emotions, behaviors, and ways of thinking is not the end of the learning and development process. Individuals also need to reflect on the changes to determine if those changes "worked" and the specific contextual factors and contingencies that influenced their effectiveness (Sessa & London, 2005). If the student is successful in navigating through the new experience and reflects on how their behavior influenced the outcome, the changes become more purposeful and lasting. This in turn will allow the student to deliberately choose triggers to further

challenge him- or herself (or to deliberately choose an easier route) in the future.

Leadership Learning

This model of learning can be used to understand the processes underlying leadership learning and development. To study how leadership learning takes place, the triggers for leadership learning and development and their outcomes were investigated in college student leaders (Sessa, Morgan, Kalenderli, & Hammond, 2014). Using interviews to identify events leading to lasting changes in students as leaders and the lessons they learned (see McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988), students described the following triggers:

- Challenging experiences (50%)
- Learning from other people (28%)
- Formal leadership courses and leadership development programs (10%)
- Other experiences (12%)

The outcomes students mentioned included learning about their leadership identity, ways of thinking about leadership, leadership skills and competencies, and formal leadership knowledge.

Most of these events occurred within the university system and predominantly occurred in clubs and organizations, the arts, athletics, Greek organizations, student government, student positions such as residence hall assistants, and through interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. This suggests that student clubs and organizations, student government, and the roles students play within these groups serve as environments where students learn how to lead, either through the experiences that they encounter or through their interactions with others in these situations.

In the next section, both challenging experiences and learning from other people are discussed in more detail. Then, formal courses and leadership development programs are discussed as a method of framing and solidifying more explicit leadership learning, and as complementary experiences that lead to different learning and development outcomes. All such experiences are vital for well-rounded leadership learning and development in students.

Learning from Challenging Experiences. Challenging experiences stretch students' ability to work outside of their comfort zone. When students are pushed out of their comfort zones, their activation levels stimulate the learning processes (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). What is it about challenging experiences that cause leadership learning processes to be activated? Five characteristics are likely to turn experiences into leadership learning triggers (Ohlott, 2004, p. 155): When in a situation with *unfamiliar responsibilities*, students need to develop new knowledge, skills, behaviors,

or feelings. When they accept *higher levels of responsibility*, students need to juggle a greater number of more complex projects than they have encountered in the past. Students may discover some sort of *change is needed* such as fixing a problem, changing the way their club is run, or changing behavior to align with new circumstances. *Crossing boundaries* may be necessary, such as when school administration needs to be convinced to support a proposal or coordination is needed with another club to put on an event. And finally, students often find that they are *leading a group of others who differ* from the leader and from one another in many distinctive ways and that such diversity of perspective often triggers learning (Dugan et al., 2013). These differences may include culture, gender, race, ethnicity, age, year in school, major, and living arrangements (on or off campus). Managing diversity helps leaders begin to internalize how their perspective is not the only valid one and how their particular demographic profile and experiences shape their outlook and way of doing things. For example, leadership skill differences were found between students who had interracial interactions very often compared to those who did so rarely (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 209). Greater interracial interactions result in learning to engage diversity and be better prepared as a leader. In each challenge, students are called on to think critically about the situation, identify underlying causes and consequences of problems, and process new and ambiguous information.

The following were mentioned most often in our past research as being challenging events for students:

1. *Initial involvement*, such as being a member of organizations, task forces, project teams, or committees for the first time. Although students were not often in formal leadership roles, they were not merely passive members who attended the occasional meeting. They were involved and they worked hard and interacted with others, which pushed them out of their comfort zones. These events often happened early in a student leader's college years. These experiences set the stage for future challenging experiences.
2. *Volunteering for or taking on a leadership role on a project team, committee, or task force* in which students independently started and were responsible for an initiative and had to convince others to help them attain their goal. When this role was initiated by the student, they were responsible for some outcome(s), and the expected outcome was short term, with a defined start and end date.
3. *Formal leadership positions with real bottom lines* for which students were elected or selected including (a) first formal leadership roles on e-boards of clubs and organizations, student government positions, and on-campus leadership positions; (b) moving up in an organization to a higher leadership position with expanded scope and scale; and (c) moving to another organization that required changing their approach to leadership. These shifts in position or approach

represented permanent or long-term change for students. In these positions, leaders had to get results through working with others rather than doing it all by themselves. Additionally, leaders were accountable, not only for their own actions but also for the actions of those on the team (and perhaps members of the whole organization) and for the outcomes of the organizational decisions.

4. *Starting a club or association* in which students built something new from the ground up. Executives report one of the toughest assignments they faced in their careers was to start a business, department, or initiative out of nothing (McCall et al., 1988); these student leaders were engaging in this challenging event while still in school!

Learning from Others. Not all learning about leadership comes from challenging experiences; much can stem from interactions with other people. In these cases, something another person or group does or how they interact with the student pushes them out of their comfort zone, which activates the learning processes. The student leaders in our past research mentioned four ways that people triggered their learning and challenged them:

1. *Receiving feedback or recognition.* When students received feedback, their leader behaviors and skills were either reinforced by praise or challenged through criticism.
2. *Being challenged by role models and mentors.* Role models and mentors included faculty, bosses, administrators, coaches, club advisors, and other students. Some mentors and role models were remembered fondly, with students wanting to emulate them. However, some mentors and role models inadvertently gave students lessons in how *not* to lead, which proved just as valuable in terms of their leader development.
3. *Being challenged by peers.* Students had to learn how to work with peers. Similar to being challenged by role models and mentors, some interactions with peers were positive and some were negative; however, both types of interactions taught student leaders different perspectives and ways of interacting with others.
4. *Being challenged by others who considered them to be role models and mentors.* Student leaders, as they attained prominent leader roles, gained awareness later in their college years that they were being viewed by others as someone to emulate and as role models and mentors. This challenged the student(s) to realize that their behavior and words mattered and they learned how to be a support system for others.

For students to be challenged by others, they must be in situations where they are working closely with others, which occurs in all student

clubs and organizations. These interactions could be positive or difficult (even painful). As a result of these interactions in which student leaders were working for, with, or through others, they augmented their capacity to lead.

Formal Courses and Leadership Development Programs

Lessons students learn in the classroom or through formal leadership development programs are also important. Much of what students learn about leadership in the context of student organizations can be tacit and subconscious. They may not explicitly recognize that their learning—they were just doing it. Leadership courses or leadership development programs allow students to learn about theories of leadership, teamwork, and diversity; receive assessments/feedback; and have opportunities to reflect on what they are learning. What students learn in these courses and programs may be more concentrated on explicit rather than tacit knowledge. In other words, they may learn more about what leadership *is* and the formal language of leadership, while gaining the capacity to identify and evaluate their performance in leadership experiences according to the language and theories. This establishment of a common language of leadership can help students understand that what they are learning and doing is, in fact, leadership, and as a result, can help shape their leader identities (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Through these formal course or program experiences, students can begin to develop an ability to communicate their learning through newly acquired common language. Moving forward, as students learn more about leadership and their identity as leaders, they are more likely to take initiative in a leadership capacity. As their leader identity—the idea of who they are, their values, experiences, and perceptions as a leader—is developed, students may become more motivated to lead, more likely to engage in leadership, and more likely to seek out leadership opportunities to further develop leadership skills (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Komives et al., 2006; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005).

In summary, our research suggests formal leadership courses and leadership development programs help students process and understand what they are learning through challenging experiences and the other people associated with student organization involvement. Although the research suggests that the most effective approach to develop leaders is through engaged participation and leadership responsibility, students also need a language to speak about leadership, assessments to help them understand who they are as leaders, a space for reflection that provides the opportunity to tie their tacit knowledge to their explicit knowledge, and someone to help guide them through these processes. With planning, student organizations can play an extended role in student leader learning and development by providing challenging experiences along

with more formal avenues for scholarly discussion on leadership theory, assessments, and space for reflection. Providing this avenue in the student organization context can result in a holistic education in leadership theory and practice.

The ReAChS Model: Making Leadership Learning and Development Intentional Within Student Organizations

This chapter has outlined theoretical and research-based evidence describing how student organizations help student leaders learn and develop. These can be leveraged to affect the intentionality of leadership learning and development within the context of student organizations. In this section, we introduce the (Re)flexion, (A)ssessment, (Ch)allenge, (S)upport (ReAChS) model of leadership development (Sessa, 2017), which can be used by faculty, staff, and administrators to provide a process for students to take charge of their own leadership learning and development. ReAChS is based on the learning model discussed in the first part of this chapter, as well as on the assessment challenge support model of leadership development created within the Center for Creative Leadership (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010).

(Re)flexion. Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to think about its meaning. Students create meaning from their experiences and their reactions to those experiences, and these instances serve as a guide for future ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling. Reflection provides students with an opportunity to challenge themselves to better understand how or why they perceive, think, feel, or act the way they do. Research has found that although students understand why reflection is important and useful, they can be reluctant to engage in reflection as part of their leadership development because they do not like the often forced and time-consuming nature of it (White, 2012). Thankfully, research also shows that once busy leaders get in the habit of reflecting, they do so with greater ease over time (McCall, 2010). Faculty, staff, and administrators can help students learn about reflection and can help guide them in reflection through conversations, written assignments, and after-action reviews with their teams. Student organizations can facilitate sessions that create an open forum to discuss student experiences, providing the opportunity to both learn from one another and engage in conversation about how to adapt to the various challenges students encounter. For instance, asking a question about what went well about an experience and what could have gone better may start the reflection process and could be followed with prompts about how each student's role influenced the process and outcomes and what could be done differently next time. They could then be asked about what they learned from particular outcomes and what factors influenced their learning.

As a result of reflection on a past experience, students can identify challenges that will propel them into the future. In addition, reflections about the challenge, the learning processes, and the outcome can create openness to learning more about leadership. This increases the likelihood of students engaging in learning about leadership and being willing to persist through leadership challenges.

Self-(A)ssessment. If students do not have a thorough understanding of who they are as they participate in leadership experiences, it is difficult to take charge of their own leadership development. This type of self-assessment is discovering information about themselves: who they are, what their current level of behavior or performance is, what their current strengths are, and what development needs are important in their current situation. The idea behind self-assessment is that the more students know about themselves and how they are currently performing (and what is working and what is not working), the readier they are to be triggered to learn. Assessment also pinpoints areas for learning and development so that students can make appropriate decisions about what to concentrate on. Faculty, staff, and administrators can help students learn about themselves by providing various assessments, including personality inventories, skills and competencies instruments, multirater feedback instruments, and leadership-specific instruments (such as measuring leadership self-efficacy).

(Ch)allenges. Challenges are the primary leader learning and development triggers. Students in our research were not intentional about choosing challenges. But with knowledge, choosing challenges can happen intentionally. Faculty, staff, and administrators can help students in three ways. First, they can help students reflect on past challenges to determine the messages they have learned about leadership, who they are as a leader, and what skills and knowledge they have gained to this point. Most students are not aware of the degree to which past experiences influence their thoughts about leadership, their readiness to learn leadership, their motivation to lead, their leadership identity, and their own leadership behaviors. Second, students can be encouraged to assess the level of challenge in their current positions and roles. Are they dealing with new or unfamiliar responsibilities? Have they moved into a position recently with more or higher levels of responsibility? Are they working on some sort of change initiative? Are they working with other clubs or administration or crossing other boundaries? Are they working with or managing peers who are different from themselves? Leadership educators can also encourage students to take on more challenges within their current situations depending on their capabilities, needs, and interests. Perhaps for some, being an active member of a club is challenge enough for now. However, for someone who wants or needs to learn delegation, encouraging him or her to head a committee or task force might be the right opportunity. Finally, students can be encouraged to take personal control of their ongoing leadership learning and development by

setting goals and initiating plans that would take place during college or in the next few years.

(S)upport. When students are facing tough self-assessments or difficult challenges, their support network can make the difference between learning experiences and experiences that lead to frustration or failure. A support network is embedded into a student organization and includes professors, advisors, mentors, friends, peers, or others a student may interface with who provide encouragement, counsel, honest assessment and feedback, and compassion. Support networks can be leveraged to find confidence in oneself and provide reassurance about strengths, current skills, and areas for improvement, as well as establish ways of viewing the “bigger picture” of leadership. Faculty, staff, and administrators can encourage students to leverage a support network to find encouragement, to enable confidence in their ability to learn and grow, to keep them on track regarding leadership development progress, and to provide long-term support and guidance.

The ReAChS Model. This model can be taught to students to provide a process through which they can take control of their own leadership learning and development. Once they understand how they learn, reflection allows them to shape their experiences into learning. Reflection further provides an opportunity to define and seek challenges that will stimulate their learning. Self-assessments can help students realize the gaps between where they are today and where their desired state is. As a result, they can explore and deliberately choose challenging opportunities that expand their leadership. Finally, this learning is difficult to do alone. A support network can provide a collective support group, provide a positive environment, engender empathy from peers, and allow guidance from supervisors to help students analyze situations and stay on track.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we draw on research to demonstrate that the experiences students encounter within various student organizations, and the people with whom they interact within those organizations, are powerful triggers for their leadership learning and development. However, most of the learning is tacit learning or learning how to engage in leadership without being aware of what is being learned or that they are learning leadership. To more fully develop as leaders, students also need to learn the more explicit theories and language of leadership, as well as have the space to tie explicit and tacit learning together through reflection and assessment. Although students indicated they gain the explicit knowledge in leadership coursework and development programs, student organizations can be designed to develop students more holistically to include both explicit and tacit learning. This can be accomplished by introducing reflection,

self-assessment, and the deliberate selection of challenges in a supportive environment (ReAChS) within student organizations.

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