Learning Leadership and Reflective Practice:
An Exploratory Study of Nursing Managers

Matsuo Makoto, JAPAN

Graduate School of Business Administration, Kobe University

E-mail: mmatsuo@b.kobe-u.ac.jp

Abstract

Although the role of leadership has been emphasized in facilitating learning in the workplace, there is limited systematic research directly linked to leadership and learning. This study investigated the characteristics of leadership behaviors that facilitate workplace learning using data from a survey of 228 nursing managers in 22 hospitals. Results of structural equation modeling indicate that encouraging reflective practice plays a central role in enhancing workplace learning, and reflective practice was facilitated by clarifying the mission of the unit and promoting role modeling. The findings suggest that reflective practice combined with goal setting and social learning promotes workplace learning. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

The literature of workplace learning has expanded in volume and across diverse fields covering organization and management, sociology of work, labor, adult education, and human resource development (Fenwick, 2008). Considering the emergent notion of learning as the process of becoming a competent participant in a social and organizational process (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991), new opportunities for research and discussion in organizational learning have been provided by the rapid shift in focus toward workplace activities and work practices (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000).

In facilitating learning in an organization, the role of leadership has previously been emphasized. Creating the type of conditions that facilitate and sustain a favorable level of collective learning is one of the greatest challenges for leadership at all levels in organizations (Yukl, 2009). Despite its importance, there has been limited systematic research directly linking leadership and learning (Waldman et al., 2009). In past research, the leadership – learning relationship has been investigated primarily in

terms of transactional and transformational leadership styles (Waldman et al., 2009). The primary goal of this study was to clarify the characteristics of leadership behavior that facilitate workplace learning in professional organizations using data from a survey of nursing managers.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Garavan et al. (2002), workplace learning refers to a set of processes that occur within specific organizational contexts and involve the acquisition and assimilation of integrated clusters of knowledge, skills, values, and feelings that result in fundamental changes in the foci and behaviors of individuals and teams (p. 61). This definition involves components of organizational process, knowledge acquisition, and behavioral changes of individuals and teams.

Workplace learning can be viewed as group-level learning or a sub-process of organizational learning. Edmondson (2002) argued that group-level analyses of organizational learning are important to connect individual-level factors such as cognition and behavior to organizational-level outcomes. Based on the previous studies, the present research defines workplace learning in terms of three aspects: individual learning (skill development of individual members), group level learning (process improvement), and learning outcome (quality of work unit performance).

Although little research has examined the linkage between leadership and organizational learning (Waldman et al., 2009), two empirical studies were published in the special issue of the Leadership Quarterly in 2009. These articles are based on Bass' (1985) framework of transformational/transactional leadership.

Jansen et al. (2009) examined executive directors of Fortune Global 500 firms and found that transformational leadership had a positive effect on exploratory innovation but had no significant effect on exploitative innovation, whereas transactional leadership had a positive effect on exploitative innovation but a negative effect on exploratory innovation. Nemanich and Vera (2009) investigated teams in a large multinational firm undergoing integration after acquisition and found that transformational leadership has a positive impact both on a learning culture characterized by psychological safety, openness to diverse opinions, and participation in decision making and on the ability to explore new capabilities while exploiting existing ones in teams.

The leadership–learning relationship at the team level has also been studied by Edmondson and colleagues without using the transformational/transactional leadership framework. Edmondson et al. (2001) reported that successful implementers promoted shared meaning and process improvement through reflective practice, which includes reviewing data, discussing past cases, planning next cases, and

suggesting technical process changes through formal meetings, informal conversations, and shared reviews of relevant data.

As Edmondson et al. (2001) reported, the role of reflective practice has been emphasized in the research of professional organizations. Because this study focuses on learning leadership in professional organizations, the following is a brief literature review of reflective practice.

The concept of reflective practice was proposed by Schön (1983). Raelin (2002) defined reflective practice as the practice of periodically stepping back to consider the meaning of what recently transpired to others and to oneself in our immediate environment. Reflection is concerned with the process or means by which individuals make sense and reconstruct meaning of what has been planned, observed, or achieved in practice. Therefore, it is essential to learning to convert tacit experience into explicit knowledge, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice, allowing us to critique our taken-for-granted assumptions, and encouraging us to be receptive to alternative ways of reasoning and behaving (Gray, 2007).

Although the role of reflection practice has been stressed in previous works, little research has been conducted on what might make one practitioner more inclined than another not to stop at certainty but to be open to engaging in reflective practice (Yanow, 2009). This study is concerned with the leadership behaviors that promote reflective practice in the workplace.

The primary goal of this study was to clarify the characteristics of leadership behavior that facilitate workplace learning in professional organizations. As the research presented is exploratory in nature, the research model is developed and tested during the analysis. The following research question is proposed.

RQ: What kinds of leadership behaviors promote workplace learning in professional organizations?

3. Methodology

To collect data on leadership behaviors that facilitate workplace learning, 13 mid-level nursing managers with good reputations as leaders who facilitated both staff development and the quality of nursing on their wards were interviewed in seven hospitals. From the interview and survey data, 199 aspects of leadership behavior were extracted, and a questionnaire was prepared.

Data were collected by distributing self-administered questionnaires to nursing managers in charge of specific wards and to their superiors (general nursing mangers or deputy general nursing managers). Nursing managers were asked to respond to the

questions in reference to their own leadership behaviors, whereas their superiors were asked to evaluate the present conditions of the wards run by the nursing managers (staff development, process improvement, and the quality of nursing care). Of the 256 questionnaires distributed, 255 were returned. A total of 228 questionnaires were considered usable after removing missing answers (final response rate was 89.0%). The average nurse experience in the sample was 25.26 years (SD = 6.69), and 94.9% were women.

Based on the work of Fenwick (2008), Zellmer-Bruhn and Gibson (2006), and Clarke (2005), workplace learning was measured with three items: "development of young and core nursing staff," "process improvement," and "quality of nursing services." Respondents (general managers or deputy general managers) were asked about their perceptions of workplace learning in the nursing mangers' units using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.75. The scores for each item were used as observable variables for workplace learning.

The scale of learning leadership was developed based on items that were identified in the preliminary research. The procedures, partly based on Churchill's (1979) scale-development paradigm using factor analysis and Cronbach's alphas were adopted to produce the dimensions. Leadership-learning items were grouped into five dimensions: "encouraging reflective practice," "supporting team activities," "promoting role modeling," "clarifying the mission of the unit," and "clarifying individual goals". The Cronbach's alphas for these dimensions were 0.83, 0.87, 0.82, 0.77, and 0.78, respectively. The scores for each item were used as observable variables for each dimension of learning leadership.

To evaluate the convergent validity of the model constructs, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with six latent constructs of learning and a total of 24 measures was conducted. The results show that all items significantly loaded on the respective constructs (p < 0.001), and the goodness-of-fit statistics for the model were as follows: $\chi2$ = 400.60, df = 237, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.05, and RMR = 0.03. That all the items significantly loaded on the assigned constructs and that the fit indices were relatively good provides evidence of convergent validity.

Assuming that group and individual goals influence interpersonal relationships, which in turn affect individual thinking and behaviors, a sequential model shown in Figure 1 was proposed.

4. Results

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the proposed research model, as SEM provides a simultaneous estimation of the model parameter estimates

and overall model fit estimates. Scores for each item were considered observable indices of workplace learning, encouraging reflective practice, supporting team activities, promoting role modeling, clarifying the mission of the unit, and clarifying individual goals.

The fit of the model indicated acceptable agreement with the covariance in the data: $\chi 2 = 400.60$, df = 237, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.05, and RMR = 0.03. The standardized path coefficients for the model are presented in Figure 1.

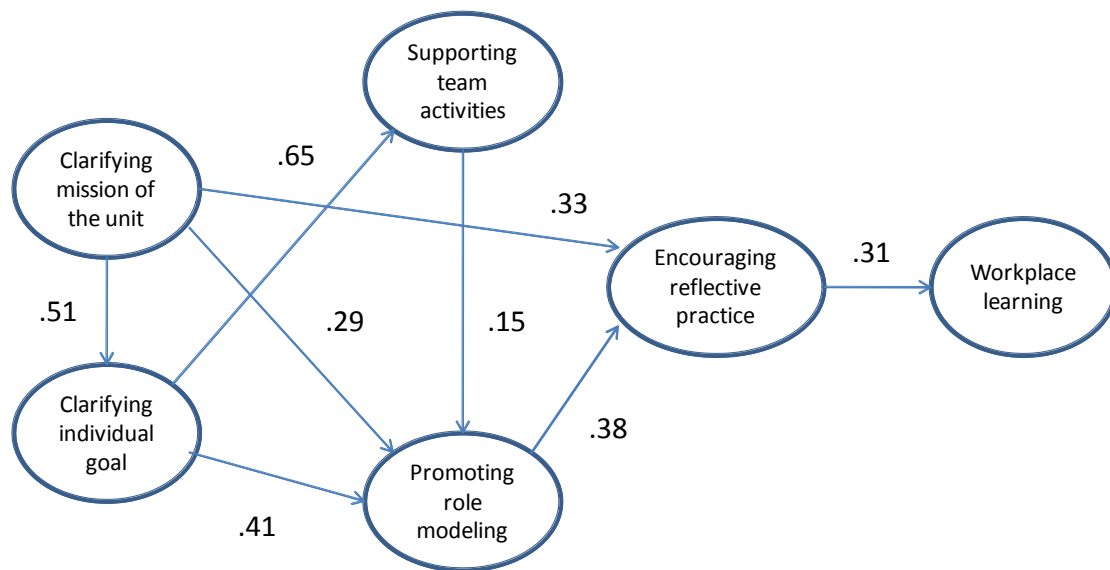

Figure 1. Structural Equation Results

Workplace learning was positively associated with encouraging reflective practice ($\beta = 0.31$, p < 0.05), indicating that workplace learning is activated when nursing managers help staff nurses reflect upon their practices. Encouraging reflective practice was positively related to clarifying the mission of the unit ($\beta = 0.33$, p < 0.01) and promoting role modeling ($\beta = 0.38$, p < 0.01), suggesting that nursing managers can help staff nurses reflect on their practices by clarifying the ward mission and providing role models. Promoting role modeling was positively associated with clarifying the mission of the unit ($\beta = 0.29$, p < 0.05), clarifying individual goals ($\beta = 0.41$, p < 0.05), and supporting team activities ($\beta = 0.15$, p < 0.05) indicating that nursing managers can support staff nurses to learn from role models when managers clarify both ward mission and goals of staff nurses and support team activities. Supporting team activities was positively related to clarifying individual goals ($\beta = 0.65$, p < 0.05), indicating that nursing managers can support team activities when they help individual staff nurses to develop clear goals. Clarifying the mission of the

unit was positively related to clarifying individual goals (β = 0.51, p < 0.01), suggesting that nursing mangers can help staff nurses to know their own goals by clearly articulating the ward mission.

5. Discussion

Few prior studies have been systematically conducted to examine the direct relationship between leadership and learning (Waldman et al., 2009). A major contribution of this study was to clarify the interrelated characteristics of leadership behaviors that facilitate workplace learning.

The findings of this study extend previous research on learning leadership in three important ways. First, the results demonstrate the importance of facilitating reflective practice in leading workplace learning. Encouraging reflective practice may be a central characteristic in learning leadership. The scale used in this study includes items on "asking what the issues are," "providing opportunities to think about their job," and "making staff think the reasons and meanings of their conducts that they normally process without paying much attention," which are equivalent to the concept of reflective practice proposed by Schön (1983).

The findings also correspond to Edmondson et al.'s (2001) report that successful implementers of innovative cardiac surgery teams promoted shared meaning and process improvement through reflective practice. With reflective practice, we can convert tacit experience into explicit knowledge, understand experiences that may have been overlooked in practice, critique our taken-for-granted assumptions, and encounter alternative ways of reasoning and behaving (Gray, 2007).

Second, this study revealed that reflective practice is closely associated with goal setting and social learning. The results indicated that nursing managers promote reflective practice of staff nurses by clarifying the mission of the ward and promoting role modeling. This suggests that goal setting (Latham and Locke, 2007) and social learning (Bandura, 1977) are antecedents of reflective practice. It can be interpreted that group-level goals and role models may provide standards by which staff nurses appreciate and consider the meaning of their practices in the workplace. We should note that goal setting and role modeling indirectly influence workplace learning through reflective practice.

Finally, the characteristics of learning leadership identified here approximately correspond to four dimensions of transformational leadership (Avolio et al., 1999; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006;). Learning leadership may be closer to transformational than to transactional leadership, which stresses contingent reward and management by exception (Avolio et al., 1999), although learning leadership has unique characteristics in that behaviors related to goal setting and role modeling are

combined as tools for enhancing followers' reflective practice.

These findings should be considered in the light of their limitations. First, the data of this study were limited to nursing managers. The questions raised in this study should be examined in various industries and cultures. Second, as the concepts of learning leadership and workplace learning and the scale for measuring them were developed for this study, more work is needed to validate the scale. By conducting the survey in different contexts, we could develop more reliable and valid scales that could be applied to broader fields. Third, a research model was developed during the analysis of the present research. The model should be replicated in future research. Finally, this study was exploratory, and the relationship between learning leadership and other types of leadership remains unclear. It is necessary for future research to compare learning leadership scales with other existing scales such as those for transformational leadership and transactional leadership.

6. References

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