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Transformational Learning in Women's Leadership Development Training

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in interest in women's leadership development. However, the nature of change for women in leadership development training and the processes within the training setting that produce change remain under-explored. This paper examines the learning processes within training settings in the context of the Women's Leadership Series (WLS), a leadership development initiative for scientists and managers within the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). It documents this process within a multi-stage framework and concludes that transformational learning can indeed take place in the context of a classroom and in the specific setting of leadership development training.

Keywords: Women's Leadership Development, Training, Transformational Learning

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in interest in women's leadership development (e.g., Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, the nature of change for women in leadership development training and the processes within the training setting that produce change remain underexplored. The few studies evaluating the impact of leadership development question whether participants effectively deploy their training upon return to their work settings (e.g., Velsor 1998; Markus 2001; Young & Dixon 1996). This paper, examines the leadership transformation process within a training setting that catalyzed leadership transformation in the context of the Women's Leadership Series (WLS), a leadership development initiative for women scientists and managers within the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). It complements previous assessments of leadership training such as those conducted by Woltring, Constantine and Schwarte (2003).

Transformational learning engages the learner intellectually and emotionally (Kegan 2000) and alters the learner's assumptions and world view so that the he or she undergoes a significant and irreversible shift in understanding and behavior (Mezirow 1991, 2000; Clark 1993). According to adult learning theorists (Kegan 2000; Mezirow 2000; Rogers 1961), the transformational learning process is an inherent part of expanding personal agency, a critical task in the process of becoming a leader. For example, Zaleznick (1977) argued that leaders are *twice-born* individuals, and Bennis (2003) noted that "What distinguishes the leader from everyone else is that he(/she) takes all of (his/her) life experiences...and makes himself(/herself) all new and unique" (p. 62). The question is how this relates to women leaders in training settings.

In this paper, I view women's leadership development training as a potentially transformational experience, one that enables women learners to expand their sense of personal agency in their leadership role. The training participant enters the learning environment with an identity or socialization based on a set of assumptions and beliefs acquired over a lifetime. The resulting world view is manifested in what Mezirow (2000) called *habits of mind*, the broad, generalized ideas through which the training participant filters experiences. Habits of mind shape expectations, intentions and purposes, and thereby provide adults with a sense of identity. They also provided a set of ideas and assumptions for interpreting leadership challenges. However, there are times when the training participant's best efforts to achieve a goal are frustrated, and they are faced with what Dewey (1938) referred to as a *problematic situation*. This sort of event can trigger a transformational learning process (Mezirow 2000).

In the present context, the problematic situation manifests itself in the form of what I call a *leadership dilemma*. Adapting from Mezirow (1991, 2000), the transformational learning process for leadership training involves the first four stages depicted in Figure 1. The last stage in this figure emerged as one of the findings of this study. This stage-model, composed of the following four stages, is used as a framework for my data analysis:

- Articulating a leadership dilemma
- Meaning making
- Achieving transformative insight

- Connecting insight to leadership practice

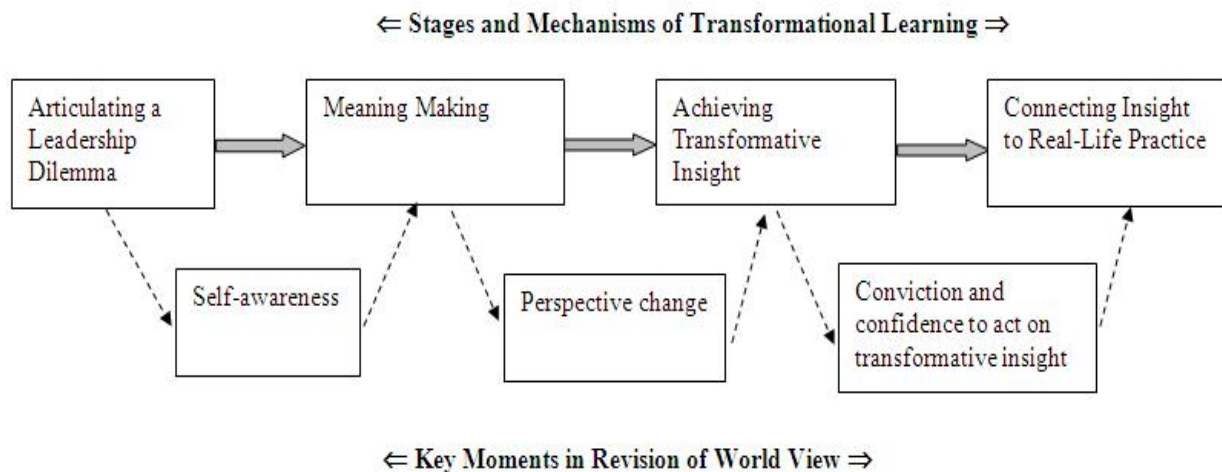


Figure 1. The process of leadership transformation.

When a leadership dilemma is encountered, it becomes salient, occupies the forefront of the learner's emotional and intellectual attention, and creates the conditions for meaning making. In an effort to overcome a problem and achieve a goal, the individual seeks new information that would enable her to understand what she has to do to overcome difficulties and effectively pursue desired outcomes. This leads to the third stage of transformational learning, achieving a transformative insight, described by Mezirow (2000) as being "*epochal*, a sudden dramatic, reorienting insight or *incremental* involving a progressive series of transformations in habits of mind" (p. 21). Once a transformative insight is achieved, it tends to be irreversible (Clark 1993). Finally, as documented in this research, the emerging Woman leader must connect the transformative insight to her everyday leadership practice through an evolving shift in thinking and acting.

Leadership Training

Before turning our attention to whether and how transformational learning processes can take place in training settings, I will briefly describe two components of leadership development training: design formats and training impact. Leadership training programs typically make use of one of three design formats: 360 degree feedback, feedback intensive training, and skill-based training (Velsor 1998). A 360 degree feedback design uses a structured instrument to collect information about how others perceive a feedback recipient's performance on a set of leadership behaviors. Observers usually include the feedback recipient's peers, boss, subordinates, and customers. This instrument is also used to obtain parallel self perception information which is juxtaposed and compared to information from observers to provide insight into one's leadership strengths and weaknesses. A feedback intensive design uses multiple activities and tools to help learners explore various aspects of their personality and effectiveness. Together, these activities are intended to give a participant a comprehensive view of herself. The goal of a skill-based training program is to expand learner knowledge, enhance existing skills and build new skills.

A wide range of activities can be used in the context of each training design format. Among the most common activities are lectures and theoretical input, case study analysis, group work, role plays, simulations, and film analysis. Each of these activities is tailored to the goals and purposes of the training. For example, in a 360 degree design the activities are geared towards fostering understanding and skill development anchored in the results of the observer feedback. In a feedback intensive design each activity is used to offer a different and sometimes complementary lens for understanding one's leadership practice. The hope is that the synthesis of these inputs would foster more complete self-understanding. Finally, in a skill based program the activities are aimed at building trainee knowledge and offering her with opportunities for practicing new behaviors.

These activities are intended to facilitate leadership development as evidenced in change in six areas: knowledge acquisition, increased self-awareness, perspective change, and skill development (McCauley & Hughes-James 1994; Markus 2001; Velsor 1998; Young & Dixon 1996; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt 2002). A key issue with any leadership training is whether these impacts will translate into effective deployment of new behaviors upon returning to their work settings. That is, can a learner sustain and further develop her new perspectives? Can she bring remain self aware and use this awareness to do things differently? Can she sustain this once she has re-entered into the workplace? For the answer to these questions to be in the affirmative, the learner needs to have experienced transformational learning in the training setting. As discussed above, transformational change is deep and fundamental such that the learner cannot return to old ways of seeing and doing. This study examines whether transformational learning can occur in a training setting such that perception change is permanent, leading not only to new behavior but a process in which a learner undergoes continual learning in the organization—incorporating a fundamentally new sense of self in an unchanged setting.

Research Setting and Methodology

The Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) is a strategic alliance that seeks to use scientific knowledge to pursue the goal of achieving sustainable food security in developing countries. The alliance is composed of private foundations that support fifteen scientific research centers and international and regional organizations. These entities work with agricultural research centers and civil society organizations in developing countries with the goal of using scientific knowledge to inform policy formulation and implementation. The WLS was launched in 1995 to help women overcome some of the everyday leadership and management challenges they faced, as well as to provide them with an opportunity for building a strong network within the CGIAR. The WLS is administered by the CGIAR Gender and Diversity (G&D) Program as part of its comprehensive program of increasing the percentage of highly qualified developing-country and female staff in the CGIAR Centers.

Three courses are offered as part of the WLS: Women's Leadership and Management, Negotiation Skills for Women, and Advanced Leadership. At the time of the study, the advanced leadership course was being offered for the first time. Therefore, this study focused on the first two courses which had been offered for a period of ten years. By 2005, more than 300 CGIAR women had participated in the WLS courses. The total number of participants in any course range between 15 and 30 although the group tends toward the higher number. The initial

participants in the WLS were international women scientists. More recently, the courses have included women in all types of managerial jobs at all levels of the research centers and across all recruitment categories. Access to WLS alumnae was gained through a web-survey with permission from the CGIAR and 24 alumnae located around the world were interviewed. Alumnae came from twelve of the fifteen research centers comprising the CGIAR and were located at different levels of the CGIAR system (headquarters, regional, country-level). As indicated in Table 1 they came from a variety of countries in six regions of the world. These individuals took the WLS course between 1995 and 2005. All but four of these years were represented. The interviewees were employed in various occupations and positions. Specifically, they held the following positions: scientist/researcher (25%), scientist and program or theme leader (20.8%), theme leaders (16.7%), manager (16.7%), technician (8.3%), other, including a variety of administrative functions (12.5%).

Table 1. Nationalities of Interviewees

| Region of World | Countries Represented |
|--|---|
| East Asia and Pacific (25%), | Malaysia Australia Indonesia |
| North America (20.8%), | United States Canadian |
| Europe and Central Asia (25%), | Germany and Italy (mixed ancestry) France Britain Germany Austria |
| Sub-Saharan Africa (12.5%), | Tanzania Nigeria Kenya |
| South Asia (4.2%) | Sri Lanka |
| Latin America and the Caribbean (12.5%). | Colombia Colombia Peru |

Note: Although there are research centers in the Middle East and North Africa, this region was not represented in the sample.

The interviews lasted for one to four hours and were conducted by telephone. The interview questions were designed to elicit significant leadership stories that explored the leadership experiences of alumnae before, during and after leadership training. The interview protocol has been included in the appendix. All names used in this paper are fictitious to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved. Leadership stories were analyzed using standard

qualitative analysis techniques (e.g., Bogdan & Bilken, 1998) to ascertain whether the four stages of transformative learning described above were evident.

Figure 1 depicts the analytic framework resulting from my data analysis. This framework incorporates and expands the stages of transformational learning that oriented the analysis and interpretation of the interview data. Specifically, the WLS alumnae described going through the stages identified in extant literature, they also underwent a fourth stage of connecting insights to real-life practice. Additionally, thematic reduction also identified three key moments in the revision of world view that accompany each stage: self awareness, perspective change, and conviction and confidence to act on transformative insight.

Findings

In the subsections that follow, I use qualitative data from the WLS interviews to describe findings pertaining to the process of transformational learning among women participants in leadership training. This description is organized in terms of the four stages of transformational learning identified above and incorporates key moments in the revision of world view.

Articulating a Leadership Dilemma

Articulating a leadership dilemma involves recognizing a salient leadership challenge. This leads to greater self-awareness: recognizing the unconscious fears and assumptions shaping one's thinking and action, making the link between these habitual processes and one's leadership dilemma, and the identification of internal barriers to leadership effectiveness. Self-awareness was a significant moment in the transformational learning process for each WLS workshop participant. In each case, the desire for change was strong because the problems the participants faced were very vexing to them. The articulation of a leadership dilemma was facilitated by feedback from peers, receiving one-on-one coaching from instructors, and engaging with learning materials including cases, readings and self assessments.

The following story demonstrates how feedback from peers and a 360 degree instrument were pivotal to the articulation of Rosaria's leadership dilemma. During the leadership course, participants were put into groups that worked together on a variety of activities throughout the one-week period. After having worked together on several tasks, members of the group were asked to give one another written and oral feedback on their group participation. While participants in Rosaria's group felt that her feedback to them had been the most thorough and insightful, none had felt they could offer her any feedback in return: she had been too silent, and they did not know what to say. This in itself was invaluable feedback for her, allowing her to realize that her silence had prevented others from having a sense of her strengths and weaknesses.

Feedback from her colleagues at work, however, was less neutral. One comment she received from the 360 degree instrument was that she was "unimaginative," yet she knew that this was not the case. This contrast with the WLS participants' feedback enabled Rosaria to recognize her leadership dilemma. At best, her silence could be interpreted neutrally in that it made it difficult for others to assess her strengths and weaknesses, but at worst it could be

interpreted negatively. Her silence was not serving her well. Further reflection revealed her motivation and habitual ways of thinking. Her hesitance to communicate her ideas stemmed from fear of possible rejection, but her team members' positive reaction to her enabled her to realize that her fears were largely unfounded. One WLS group member told her that her silence enabled her to be a keen observer and an insightful team member. Members of her group advised her to share her thoughts more often. Their comments resonated with her deeply. She knew she was a very creative and imaginative person, and she learned that her co-workers did not know this because she never shared her ideas.

Meaning Making

The second stage of transformational learning in leadership development is meaning making. The activities involved in meaning making precipitate the key moment of perspective change to effectively reduce the tension inherent in the leadership dilemma by changing the way the participant thought about pre-existing challenges and presenting new alternatives. Beatrice's story illustrates the use of several meaning making mechanisms in an effort to resolve a pre-existing leadership dilemma. Her pre-WLS leadership story had to do with overcoming isolation as the leader of a new, system-wide initiative. Despite her best efforts to interest and engage key decision-makers in the activities of her initiative, only a handful responded enthusiastically and indicated an interest in working with her. A second group of constituents responded negatively and a sizeable third group was simply silent, with a "wait and see" attitude. During the Leadership course, she was presented with a tripartite model of three types of constituents involved in any change process: allies, opponents and fence-sitters. In the quote below, Beatrice described how theory enabled her to frame and thereby articulate her dilemma:

I remember during the course when this model of allies, opponents, and fence-sitters, was presented—I just had this light bulb go off in my head. And (I said): "That's what I'm facing!" I immediately pictured all of those (constituents) in those three categories—I could immediately place them, in my head.

Theory was also used in one-on-one coaching and collaborative and supportive interactions with workshop participants. As she explained, in these interactions she learned a lot about what would and would not work in the unique culture of her organization:

Once I had (the model in mind), I thought, okay, here are my allies. Here's who I can turn to for support and where I can deliver, right away, and start having results. For the others, I concretely thought about their information needs, and then I started thinking about how I could move fence-sitters and opponents into allies, but that was going to be a longer-term effort. I was first going to start with my allies.

I wasn't taking the easy way out—it really was the right thing to do. And yet, to make sure I gave concerted effort, giving information to the others and trying to understand what kinds of information would make them happy. And that's when I became very data driven, recognizing the culture of the organization and doing lots of survey work and hitting them with data, more data. So it couldn't be

denied—"There's not a problem." It couldn't be denied because there it was in the numbers. Facts, facts, facts—I moved us immediately away from jargon and theory. I never stood up and talked theory, although gender and organizational theory is so interesting to me. But I never talk about it, or very little do I talk about it in the CGIAR. It informs my work, but it's not what I present about. I present our own facts and figures and trends and challenges. So, I think the leadership course helped me understand that I needed to run a fact-driven program.

Achieving Transformative Insight

Meaning making, and the perspective change it entails, leads to transformative insight, and when a transformative insight occurs, there is a quality of irreversibility. The individual challenges the assumptions upon which an earlier thought pattern was based cannot go back to her old way of thinking. This leads to the third key moment, the conviction and confidence to act on the transformative insight, involving the capacity to change and handle previously thorny leadership challenges. For some workshop participants, the challenged assumptions had to do with internal factors—how the person thought and felt about herself. For others the assumptions had to do with external factors—how the person thought about the environment in which they operated. For a few individuals, internal and external factors interacted in interesting ways and had to be unraveled and challenged by the learner.

The transformative insight achieved by *hidden leaders* primarily involved challenging internal assumptions such as recognizing how they thought about themselves—as persons who lacked valuable ideas and could not effect change on their environment. This group recognized the faulty nature of these assumptions and how these faulty assumptions constrained their effectiveness. Once they became aware of their habitual pattern of thinking, hidden leaders crossed a threshold. They were unable and unwilling to see themselves in the same light—they had literally developed a new identity, albeit one that needed development and strengthening.

The transformative insight achieved by *constrained leaders* involved challenging both internal and external assumptions concerning relationships. For some, the problematic assumption involved minimizing the importance of relationships and overemphasizing the importance of task focus to organizational performance. For others, like Beatrice, it had to do with assumptions about how to build relationships that were not applicable in the culture of their organizational setting. These faulty thought processes prevented constrained leaders from building relationships and mobilizing others' contributions towards the achievement of organizational goals.

Finally, those who came to the training as *intuitive leaders* had a clear sense of and commitment to their personal values, and they were guided by these values in what they did. However, they felt at a loss in situations where their values were not considered to be important. The transformative insight for these individuals came from the affirmation of their values in the training setting and the recognition that these values were indeed functional. This not only strengthened their commitment to their convictions but enabled them to envision how to creatively express their values.

Connecting Insight to Leadership Practice

The theme of connecting insight to leadership practice gives us some insight into the translation of learning from a training setting to the work settings. The evidence gathered in this study strongly suggests that the impact of the learning process did not wane once the WLS training was over. Indeed, WLS alumnae described acting on the conviction to change, and they also sustained their changed behavior permanently. Initially, efforts to leverage training in practice are mechanical and unrefined but, over time through continued reflection and adjustment of practice, there is increased self confidence and maturation in practice. This continual learning and maturation of practice is the last key moment in the revision of world view.

The transformation from a previously-established leadership practice to a new one involves hard work and effort. This is not because there is a lack of commitment to change on the part of the learner. Rather, to change practice one has to overcome the ease of reverting to old habits. One key means of doing this is through *meaningful artifacts* deployed by the trainers and taken up by participants. Joycelyn's description below aptly describes the way in which meaningful artifacts kept the urgency for change alive once she returned to her place of work. Meaningful artifacts are objects given to participants in a training setting that have both collective and personal meaning attached to them. These objects are used by learners to maintain the immediacy and urgency to act on a transformational insight well after training by reminding, inspiring, and/or strengthening the learner to act on the learning breakthroughs achieved during a training event. Joycelyn explained:

One of the exercises during the workshop was working up and down the *ladder of inference*. They gave us some plastic ladders, and I brought it back with me and I have it here on my bulletin board, just to remind me that I should not take things for granted and should not withhold information that the other person might need to understand. This artifact is now a symbol. A symbol is an artifact with meaning added to it—you add meaning – something that you want to remember. If you don't put meaning to it, the thing is meaningless. Adding it and making yourself aware that this means what you want it to mean...is a conscious decision in which you tell yourself "when I look at this, I will remember this." It is like (recreating the) conference with myself—when I see the ladder, I will remember that. That was my way of remembering. Because my commitment—I went to this course and I learned, but I have to bring that learning back and put it to work. Otherwise, it will be a waste of time. So, it's going through that and it's just the way you are going to remember—the reminders that you have selected so that you don't forget. And the journal (another artifact) is something that helps you do that.

Implications

Transformational learning in women's leadership development training refers to a process resulting in the revision of a woman's world view. Previous empirical studies of transformational learning have tended to focus on radical departures in world view resulting

from encountering significant disorienting events such as terminal illness (e.g., Courtenay et al., 1993). However, such episodes are rare in the course of a woman's life. In my study, I was concerned with whether transformational learning can be applied to the mundane problem of women's leadership development. More specifically, I explored whether the stages of the transformational learning are applicable to women's leadership development training, and how these processes are enacted in the formal training setting.

The results suggest that transformational learning for women can indeed take place in the context of leadership development training. For all but one individual interviewed for this study, transformative insights led to real change in leadership practice. As noted by Mezirow (1991, 2000) and Knowles (1990), adults do not easily part with the ideas and assumptions that have previously given them a sense agency and control. Nevertheless, despite the challenges involved, WLS participants willingly undertook the task of revising the assumptions that previously guided their practice.

This finding might be of interest to organizations sponsoring women's leadership development training and the trainers themselves. Sponsoring organizations can benefit from individuals returning with fresh ideas and a greater sense of agency. However, these individuals return to an organization that has not changed, to an environment that may not be supportive of their continued growth as leaders. Thus, it is possible that, while organizations invest a great deal in the training of future women leaders, they may not change quickly enough to make it possible for them to reap the benefits of the training. For trainers, the model of transformational learning can provide a broad framework to use in designing training programs. For instance, trainers could create opportunities for women learners to explicitly articulate their leadership dilemmas. They could design the learning activities such that each learner can utilize other workshop participants as well as the coach in a process of resolving the dilemma they have identified. Trainers can also create an environment in which women learners are willing to engage in deep and meaningful exploration of their problems such that transformative insights can be achieved. Finally, trainers can devise ways in which women learners can connect insights from the workshop to their places of work.

The findings of my study elaborate the stages of transformational learning by articulating the mechanisms through which each stage is enacted. Many of these mechanisms have been identified in the adult learning literature and the organizational learning literatures. By articulating how these mechanisms relate to the transformational learning process, the analytic framework brings these different ideas together into a coherent framework of transformational learning. By introducing the idea of key moments in the revision of world view to the analytic model, this paper adds another dimension to our understanding of the processes of transformational learning. This dimension involves identifying the impact of each stage on the revision of a woman learner's world view. Two of these stages—self-awareness and perspective change—have received attention in the leadership development literature but have not previously been incorporated into a coherent framework of transformational learning. By bringing this dimension of the transformational learning process into the analysis, the analytic framework of this study incorporates key ideas from the leadership development literature and relates them to transformational learning in women's leadership development training.

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Biography

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