

# Management and Leadership Development – Empowering Who To Wo what?

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## Abstract

Many organizations, not least in the public sector, offer and expect their managers to participate in management and leadership development programs (MLDPs) focusing general managerial and leadership competencies (McGurk, 2010). Often, such programs are expected to mobilize and empower managers to act as strategic linking pins, translating and implementing organizationwide strategies across a wide range of local contexts. However, the actual outcomes of such programs are seldom studied. Although there is an argument for leadership development to deliver a return on investment (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010), the attention here tends to be on programs focusing interpersonal skills and evaluation of such skills (typically transformational leadership skills), most often limiting the focus to the participant managers. Further, although there is a large and growing interest in an identity perspective on leadership and leadership development, very few studies have explored the outcomes of MLDPs in terms of organizational identification, particularly for the subordinates. It remains to be empirically explored both how programs with a more strategic ambition influence the organization, and to take a wider perspective than the focus on interpersonal skills (Clarke, 2012).

In this paper, we attempt to address this situation through an empirical study of a MLDP in the public sector in Denmark. The study comprised a survey to managers as well as subordinates in a large regional administration (responsible for health care, some special needs education etc.), and a qualitative ethnographic study of the program. The survey was administered to 3 cohorts of the program and their subordinates (n=107 managers, n=913 subordinates), both at the start of the program and after it was finished. Drawing on social identity theory and multiple-foci commitment theory, we measured identification and commitment with different targets for both managers and subordinates (with the organization, the work unit, and for subordinates, identification with the leader). The qualitative ethnographic study entailed participant observation of the full program (14,5 days) for 2 different cohorts and subsequent interviews with 15 participants after completion of the program.

The results of the survey show that manager identification with and commitment to the organization and work unit decreased during the program. Similarly, subordinates also demonstrated a decrease in identification with the organization as well as with the leader. The qualitative material from participant observation of the program support these findings, and suggest that instead of identification with the organization, the program fostered identification with the participant group and offered them a stronger individual leader identity. The material further suggest that in the program, participants were exposed to the variability of the complex organization in a new way, making the organization as such less clear and less attractive as an identification target.

Following social identity theory (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004), the subordinate lower identification with the leader and the manager lower identification with the work unit combine to decrease the legitimacy of the manager in performing leadership. Further, we argue that the managers' lower identification with the organization decreases their willingness to align with the strategic organizational level ambitions.

The results are discussed in terms of organizational complexity and fragmentation, and in terms of dis- and empowerment of various actors. We argue that the complexity of the organization, both in terms of a multitude of possible identification targets and in terms of fragmentation and diversity of different units, challenges the linear notion of middle managers acting as strategic linking pins. Rather than empowering the managers to implement strategy, the program seems to foster even further de-coupling between hierarchical levels (demonstrated by manager lower identification with work unit and subordinate lower identification with the organization and the manager). At the same time, development of a stronger identification with the leader community (as suggested by the qualitative data) might be seen to empower the managers to develop the interests of this group and their own membership in it.