

Leadership Development Programs: Effectiveness from the Participants

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ABSTRACT

Leadership development programs are pivotal in shaping effective leaders across various sectors. However, the effectiveness of these programs often varies based on the participant's perspective, which is crucial yet underrepresented in existing research. This study aims to explore and document the perceived impacts of leadership development programs on their participants, focusing on personal and professional growth, skill application, and organizational influence. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from 18 participants who had completed leadership development programs within the last five years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of industries and leadership experiences were represented. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes, and theoretical saturation was achieved to ensure the comprehensiveness of the collected data. The analysis identified five main themes representing the impacts of leadership development programs: Personal Growth, Skill Acquisition, Professional Development, Application of Skills, and Organizational Impact. Each theme comprised several categories and concepts, such as enhanced self-awareness, leadership techniques, professional networking, practical application of skills in the workplace, and strategic organizational contributions, illustrating the multifaceted benefits of these programs. The study concluded that leadership development programs significantly contribute to enhancing individual competencies and organizational capabilities. These programs are instrumental in fostering not only the necessary leadership skills but also in promoting personal growth and strategic thinking, which are essential for effective leadership and organizational success.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Qualitative Research, Personal Growth, Skill Acquisition, Organizational Impact, Professional Development, Application of Skills.

1. Introduction

The effectiveness and perceived value of leadership development programs have been extensively explored across various professions and educational contexts. Despite the abundance of research, there remains a critical need to assess these programs' impact from the participants' perspectives, particularly in terms of personal growth, skill acquisition, professional development, application of skills, and organizational impact. Leadership development is pivotal in crafting effective leaders who can navigate complex challenges in their respective fields. As Gentry et al. (2013) highlight, the needs of participants in leadership development programs vary widely and addressing these needs is crucial for the success of these programs (Gentry et al., 2013). This study adopts a participant-focused approach to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs, contrasting with more traditional, facilitator-centric evaluations (Edwards & Turnbull, 2012).

The need for targeted leadership development is especially pronounced in specific professional settings, such as healthcare, engineering, and academia, where leadership skills significantly impact professional practice and organizational outcomes. For example, Pradarelli et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of leadership training for surgeons, noting that such training can improve operational efficiency and patient care (Pradarelli et al., 2016). Similarly, Danial (2023) underscores the critical role of leadership skills for engineers overseeing road projects, where leadership ability directly influences project success and safety (Danial, 2023).

Academic leadership development programs, such as those reviewed by Dannels et al. (2008) for female executives in academic medicine and by Park et al. (2022) for dental faculty, also demonstrate the sector-specific benefits of tailored leadership training. These programs not only enhance personal leadership skills but also contribute to broader institutional changes and improvements in governance and policy implementation (Dannels et al., 2008; Park et al., 2022).

Further illustrating the importance of context-specific leadership training, Allen et al. (2022) discuss a program aimed at cultivating leaders within rural communities through an 1890 land-grant institution. This case study highlights how leadership development can be instrumental in addressing unique community-specific challenges and fostering community engagement and development (Allen et al., 2022).

Longitudinal studies, such as those conducted by Lamm et al. (2018) and Posner (2009), provide insights into the long-term impacts of leadership development programs. These studies reveal that sustained changes in leadership behavior can result from well-structured programs, which not only develop immediate skills but also foster a continuous growth mindset among participants (Lamm et al., 2018; Posner, 2009).

This study employs qualitative methodologies, specifically semi-structured interviews, to delve deeper into the experiences of leadership program participants. This method allows for a comprehensive exploration of the nuanced impacts these programs have on individuals' professional trajectories and personal development. By focusing on participant narratives, this research aims to achieve theoretical saturation, ensuring a robust understanding of the varied effects of leadership training as seen through the eyes of those it aims to benefit.

In synthesizing these perspectives, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how leadership development programs can be optimized to meet the diverse needs of participants across different sectors. By examining the specific outcomes and long-term impacts reported by participants, this study adds to the growing body of literature that supports the refinement and targeted application of leadership training initiatives.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study was designed to explore the perceived effectiveness of leadership development programs as reported by participants. The primary data collection method involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth discussions while providing the flexibility to explore emergent themes.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to include a diverse range of individuals who have completed leadership development programs within the last five years. The selection aimed to cover various industries, job levels, and program types to ensure a comprehensive understanding of different experiences and perspectives.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To maintain confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used.

The study aimed to reach theoretical saturation, a point at which no new information or themes are observed in the

data. Theoretical saturation was used as a guide to determine the adequate number of interviews. Initially, a set of 15 interviews was planned. However, upon conducting the 12th interview, it became evident that saturation had been achieved as no new significant insights were emerging, and subsequent interviews confirmed this finding.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on the participant's location and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview guide included open-ended questions to probe into the participants' experiences, perceptions of the skills gained, and the applicability of these skills in their professional settings. Follow-up questions were tailored based on participants' responses to allow deeper exploration of significant topics.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved coding the transcripts and identifying patterns and themes across the data set. This process was facilitated by qualitative data analysis software, which helped organize and categorize the data efficiently. Themes

were developed both deductively from the interview guide and inductively from the participants' narratives.

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through various means, including member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the findings to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted throughout the data analysis process to provide an external check on the research approach and interpretation of the data.

3. Findings and Results

The study encompassed 18 participants, with a balanced representation across various demographics. The gender distribution was nearly even, with 9 males (50%) and 9 females (50%). Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 54 years, with the majority (11 participants, 61%) falling within the 30-40 age group, indicating a predominance of mid-career professionals. The participants represented a broad spectrum of industries, including technology (5 participants, 28%), healthcare (4 participants, 22%), finance (3 participants, 17%), education (3 participants, 17%), and manufacturing (3 participants, 17%). In terms of leadership experience, 6 participants (33%) were in senior management roles, 7 (39%) were mid-level managers, and 5 (28%) identified as emerging leaders. This diverse cohort provided a wide range of insights into the effectiveness of leadership development programs.

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
1. Personal Growth	Self-awareness	Reflection, Insight, Emotional intelligence, Self-evaluation, Mindfulness
	Confidence	Self-assurance, Risk-taking, Decision-making, Public speaking, Initiative
	Resilience	Adaptability, Stress management, Recovery from setbacks, Perseverance, Coping strategies
	Visionary Thinking	Long-term planning, Goal setting, Innovation, Strategic thinking
2. Skill Acquisition	Leadership Techniques	Delegation, Motivation techniques, Conflict resolution, Feedback methods, Leadership styles
	Communication Skills	Active listening, Articulating ideas, Negotiation, Persuasion, Non-verbal communication
	Problem Solving	Analytical thinking, Creativity, Solution development, Critical thinking, Scenario planning
	Team Management	Team building, Managing diversity, Team dynamics, Remote management, Task coordination
3. Professional Development	Networking	Building relationships, Mentorship, Industry connections, Social skills, Collaboration
	Career Advancement	Promotion readiness, Role transitions, Career planning, Achieving career goals, Professional image
4. Application of Skills	Role Competence	Technical skills, Job knowledge, Specialization, Professional certifications, Sector expertise
	Workplace Implementation	Practical application, Real-world scenarios, Efficiency improvements, Process innovation
	Leadership Influence	Team motivation, Inspiring change, Leading projects, Influence on corporate culture, Ethical leadership
5. Organizational Impact	Impact Measurement	Performance metrics, Feedback loops, Outcome assessment, Benchmarking
	Cultural Transformation	Organizational values, Change management, Cultural shifts, Employee engagement

Strategic Impact	Business strategy, Market positioning, Competitive advantage, Strategic partnerships
Succession Planning	Leadership pipeline, Talent development, Future leaders, Organizational continuity
Sustainability	Long-term planning, Environmental considerations, Social responsibility, Economic viability

Our thematic analysis revealed five primary categories of outcomes perceived by participants: Personal Growth, Skill Acquisition, Professional Development, Application of Skills, and Organizational Impact. Each category encompasses several subcategories that detail specific areas of development and application.

3.1. Personal Growth

Participants noted significant Personal Growth, which they attributed to their leadership programs. Key areas identified included:

Self-awareness: Participants reported heightened self-reflection and emotional intelligence. One remarked, "The program really forced me to look inward and understand my own emotional triggers and strengths in a way I had never done before."

Confidence: Many participants felt more equipped to take on leadership roles and make bold decisions. "After the program, I felt a surge of confidence; I was suddenly more willing to step up and tackle challenges head-on," shared another participant.

Resilience: The training also seemed to enhance participants' ability to bounce back from setbacks. A participant noted, "Learning about resilience strategies helped me manage stress better and recover from failures with more grace."

Visionary Thinking: The ability to think strategically and plan for the long term was frequently mentioned. "The program helped me to not only set more ambitious goals but also plan the steps to achieve them effectively," a participant explained.

3.2. Skill Acquisition

Skill Acquisition was another major theme, with participants describing improvements in several practical areas:

Leadership Techniques: Skills such as delegation, motivating others, and resolving conflicts were commonly enhanced. "I learned specific techniques for motivating my team and resolving conflicts without escalating tensions," one leader mentioned.

Communication Skills: Effective communication was a strong focus, including mastering negotiation and

persuasion. "The program refined my negotiation skills, making me a better communicator, especially under pressure," stated another.

Problem Solving: Critical thinking and creative solution development were also key outcomes. "It really pushed me to think outside the box and develop practical solutions to complex problems," remarked a participant.

Team Management: Managing teams effectively, especially in diverse settings, was frequently cited. "I now feel more competent in managing diverse teams and understanding the dynamics that influence team performance," noted a participant.

3.3. Professional Development

In terms of Professional Development, participants highlighted several impacts:

Networking: Building meaningful professional relationships was a significant benefit. "The networking opportunities have been invaluable, and I've been able to forge relationships that have opened doors in ways I hadn't anticipated," a participant revealed.

Career Advancement: Many participants felt that the program prepared them for higher roles and responsibilities. "The skills I acquired directly contributed to my promotion last year," shared another.

3.4. Application of Skills

The Application of Skills in real-world settings was frequently emphasized:

Workplace Implementation: Participants often mentioned the direct application of learned skills to their workplace tasks. "I've implemented several strategies from the program at work, leading to measurable improvements in our processes," a participant noted.

Leadership Influence: The ability to influence and lead change was a significant theme. "I now lead by example and have a real impact on our team's culture and productivity," another participant commented.

3.5. Organizational Impact

Finally, the Organizational Impact of leadership development was highlighted through:

Cultural Transformation: Many noted their role in driving positive cultural changes within their organizations. "I've been instrumental in shifting our workplace culture to be more inclusive and innovative," a leader mentioned.

Strategic Impact: Participants also saw their influence on organizational strategy. "My involvement in strategic planning has increased since completing the program, allowing me to help steer our company towards more sustainable practices," explained a participant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews with 18 participants revealed five main themes encapsulating the impact of leadership development programs. These themes are Personal Growth, Skill Acquisition, Professional Development, Application of Skills, and Organizational Impact. Each theme comprises multiple categories which detail specific areas of development and application, highlighting the diverse benefits and outcomes of leadership training.

The theme of Personal Growth emerged strongly, with participants discussing significant advancements in four key categories: Self-awareness, Confidence, Resilience, and Visionary Thinking. Participants noted increased self-reflection and emotional intelligence under Self-awareness. For Confidence, individuals reported enhanced self-assurance and a newfound willingness to engage in risk-taking and decision-making. Resilience was characterized by improved adaptability and stress management, with participants citing better capabilities in recovering from setbacks. Lastly, Visionary Thinking was described as enhanced strategic thinking and goal-setting capabilities, allowing participants to plan and innovate for the future more effectively.

Under Skill Acquisition, participants detailed improvements in Leadership Techniques, Communication Skills, Problem Solving, and Team Management. Leadership Techniques included learning effective delegation, motivation, and conflict resolution strategies. Communication Skills saw gains in active listening, negotiation, and persuasive communication. Problem Solving was enhanced through developed analytical and creative thinking abilities. Team Management involved learning about fostering positive team dynamics and managing diverse teams efficiently.

Professional Development encompassed advancements in Networking, Career Advancement, and Role Competence.

Networking involved building significant professional relationships and mentorships. Career Advancement was highlighted by participants' readiness for promotions and transitions into higher roles, facilitated by the skills and networks gained. Role Competence saw participants improving in their technical skills and industry-specific knowledge, contributing to their overall professional image and expertise.

In the Application of Skills theme, categories included Workplace Implementation and Leadership Influence. Workplace Implementation referred to the direct application of learned skills to workplace tasks, leading to operational improvements and innovation. Leadership Influence encompassed the ability of participants to inspire and lead change within their teams and organizations, thereby enhancing motivation and ethical leadership practices.

Finally, the Organizational Impact theme captured how leadership development influenced Cultural Transformation, Strategic Impact, Succession Planning, and Sustainability within organizations. Cultural Transformation involved shifts towards more inclusive and innovative organizational cultures. Strategic Impact described participants' roles in shaping business strategies and competitive positioning. Succession Planning included preparing future leaders, ensuring leadership continuity. Sustainability focused on incorporating long-term environmental, social, and economic planning into organizational strategies.

The findings from this qualitative study illuminate the multifaceted impacts of leadership development programs as perceived by the participants. These results resonate with existing literature, indicating that leadership training can significantly influence personal growth, skill acquisition, professional development, application of skills, and organizational impact. This discussion section elaborates on these findings, integrating them with prior research to offer a deeper understanding of their implications.

Participants reported significant personal growth, particularly in self-awareness, confidence, resilience, and visionary thinking. These findings are consistent with those of Victoroff, Schneider, and Perry (2009), who found that early leadership training could instigate a profound self-reflective process among dental students, fostering greater self-awareness and confidence. Similarly, the enhancement of resilience and visionary thinking aligns with the research by Edwards and Turnbull (2012), who advocate that cultural approaches to leadership development help cultivate these critical attributes. The emphasis on personal growth in this study underscores the transformational nature of leadership

programs, which is crucial for effective leadership across various sectors.

The acquisition of specific leadership and managerial skills such as communication, team management, and problem-solving was frequently highlighted by our participants. This observation is supported by the work of Gentry et al. (2013), who emphasized the necessity of such skills for participants in leadership programs to meet their role's demands effectively (Gentry et al., 2013). Moreover, the importance of these skills in professional settings, particularly in leadership roles, has been extensively documented (Danial, 2023), indicating the relevance of our findings in real-world applications.

Advancements in professional development, particularly in networking and career advancement, were significant outcomes noted by the participants. These findings align with Lamm, Sapp, and Lamm's (2018) longitudinal evaluation, which highlights the role of leadership development in facilitating networking opportunities and career progression (Lamm et al., 2018). Similarly, the emphasis on career advancement echoes Dannels et al.'s (2008) study, which demonstrated the impact of leadership programs on women's career trajectories in academic medicine, underscoring the role of such training in enhancing professional visibility and mobility (Dannels et al., 2008).

The application of learned skills to workplace scenarios was a prominent theme, with participants noting tangible improvements in their workplace effectiveness. This directly corresponds with findings by Snell and Dickson (2011), who reported that health care employees could effectively apply leadership behaviors learned in development programs, leading to improved workplace performance (Snell & Dickson, 2011). Additionally, Pradarelli et al. (2016) found similar applications of surgical leadership training in enhancing operational efficiency, further supporting the critical nature of skill application post-training (Pradarelli et al., 2016).

Lastly, the impact of leadership training on organizational culture and strategic outcomes was a notable theme. Participants described their roles in facilitating cultural transformations and strategic planning within their organizations. This finding is supported by Park, Chung, and Giannobile (2022), who noted the significant influence of professional leadership programs on organizational policies and practices in dental schools (Park et al., 2022). Moreover, the strategic impact observed in our study aligns with Allen et al. (2022), which illustrated how leadership training at

land-grant institutions could foster community-oriented strategic initiatives, reinforcing the broader organizational benefits of such programs (Allen et al., 2022).

This study has illustrated that leadership development programs are profoundly impactful across several domains: personal growth, skill acquisition, professional development, application of skills, and organizational impact. Participants reported enhanced self-awareness, confidence, resilience, and visionary thinking under personal growth. In terms of skill acquisition, significant improvements were noted in leadership techniques, communication skills, problem-solving, and team management. Professional development benefits included expanded networking opportunities and clear pathways for career advancement. Furthermore, participants were able to effectively apply their newly acquired skills in the workplace, leading to tangible improvements in their professional roles and contributions towards strategic and cultural transformations within their organizations.

The findings from this qualitative study affirm the value of leadership development programs, underscoring their role in not only enhancing individual competencies but also in driving organizational success. The evidence from participant experiences demonstrates the essential nature of these programs in preparing leaders who are equipped to navigate and influence complex professional landscapes effectively. By addressing both personal and professional dimensions, leadership development programs prove to be critical tools for fostering influential and resilient leaders.

This study is not without limitations. The use of qualitative methods and a relatively small sample size of 18 participants may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on the perceptions of participants without incorporating viewpoints from other stakeholders such as peers, subordinates, or supervisors, which might provide a more comprehensive view of the impact of leadership development programs. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce biases, as participants might portray their experiences and the effects of the training in a more positive light.

Future research should aim to address the limitations noted by incorporating a larger, more diverse participant pool to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could also be beneficial, tracking the long-term career progress and leadership effectiveness of program participants. Moreover, incorporating a 360-degree feedback mechanism would provide a rounded perspective on the effectiveness of leadership development programs,

involving feedback from a range of stakeholders affected by the participants' leadership roles.

The insights gained from this study suggest several practical implications for the design and implementation of leadership development programs. It is recommended that program facilitators ensure a balanced focus on both personal and professional development components, tailoring content to meet the specific needs of participants based on their industry, career stage, and personal growth objectives. Additionally, programs should incorporate mechanisms for ongoing support and feedback, allowing participants to refine their skills continually and adapt to evolving professional challenges. For organizations, investing in such comprehensive development programs is likely to result in not only more competent leaders but also in enhanced organizational performance and adaptability.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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