Developing Emotional Intelligence In Leaders: A Qualitative Research Approach

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Research is presented that explored the experiences of effective U.S. federal government leaders in developing their own emotional intelligence. The contribution to this journal is exploring how emotional intelligence is developed within adults using a qualitative, phenomenological research orientation. Specifically, this study contributes towards a greater understanding of the evolving relationship between EI, adult learning, and leadership; and the vitality of qualitative research. Recommendations for theory and implications for future research and practice are explored.

Introduction

This research (Rude, 2013) was a phenomenological study of the experiences of effective Federal government leaders in developing their emotional intelligence (EI). The study was undertaken to illuminate perceptions on how leader development, adult learning, and EI can be better integrated, and how Federal government leaders can be developed to optimally leverage intelligence and emotions. In so doing, the Federal government may be able to more effectively and responsibly develop leaders with the cognitive and emotional capacities needed to lead in a dynamic and complex adaptive system (Buckley, 1968; Schwandt, 2005; Yukl, 2012). Integrating EI and experiential/situated learning variables within research (particularly as regards Federal government leaders) has thus far been sparse and, as important, remains critical. Leaving EI development unattended may have contributed to troubling gaps within EI-related competencies (e.g., conflict management, interpersonal skills) for at least one Federal agency (Department of Defense, 2008, 2009).

The study leveraged the extensive experiences, careers, and lifespans of executives within the Federal government who won the Presidential Rank Award, a highly prestigious recognition bestowed annually by the President of the United States. The stringent criteria for that award include EI-related attributes, such as leading people and nurturing productive relationships. Using the Nelson and Low (2011) EI framework for personal excellence, experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1916, 1938); Illeris (2007, 2009, 2011); Kolb (1984), and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as core constructual elements, this study provided a rich description of how Federal government leaders experienced the development of their own EI. Although the scope of this study did not advocate a particular leadership theory, the essence of the experiences shared for this study amplified the connection between leadership, leader development, and EI (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2011; Yukl, 2010).

This study was based on the ability-based Nelson and Low (2011) transformative EI learning model, which was previously validated (Hammett, 2007; Nelson, Low, & Vela, 2011). Four specific leadership skills within the Nelson and Low (2011) framework are: (a) social awareness (comfort); (b) empathy; (c) decision making; and (d) (personal) leadership. These skills may begin as intrapersonal in nature, but manifest in an interpersonal (or social) context. As identified by participant testimonies for this study, myriad experiences over the course of one’s career and life journey (both inside and outside their Federal government careers) provide opportunities for developing and influencing EI. While some developmental activities – especially those that are highly experiential in nature, such as rotational assignments – are intentionally designed to hone EI, many participants cited unintentional incidents as defining moments in the EI milieu.

Accordingly, significance to the voices of study participants through this transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) approach revealed unique, individual perspectives on developmental experiences that shaped the EI of these effective leaders. By using Moustakas (1994) techniques such as epoche and horizontalization, the researcher was able to glean a meaningful array of perspectives that should shed further light on EI’s relevance vis-à-vis leadership (and vice versa), and instrumental thoughts on helpful developmental interventions.

The sections that follow describe the problem statement and research question, followed by a
References


Author Note

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