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Experience the Swedish Buffet: Lessons from a Holistic Leader Development Program

BUSN49 Degree Project MPKC

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Kalliopi and Liga

Abstract

- Title:** Experience the Swedish Buffet: Lessons from a Holistic Leader Development Program
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- Keywords:** Leader development program, experiential learning
- Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to explore the construct of leader development through the experiences of participants in a youth non-profit leader development program.
- Methodology:** This research is a qualitative explorative case study that is conducted based on semi-structured open-ended interviews and review of documentation. Our analysis is guided via a hermeneutic methodology and is established from an interpretative and constructive disposition.
- Theoretical Perspective:** The theoretical framework of this study is based on a consideration of different perspectives regarding the development of leaders following their participation in leader development programs. More specifically, the theoretical base under which our empirical data was analysed examines previous research on leader development programs which are oriented around the didactic classroom-based approach as well as

literature on leader development programs which support learning through experiences.

Empirical Findings:

Our empirical findings are derived from 16 semi-structured interviews with participants from a youth non-profit leader development program. Additionally, documentation has been reviewed relevant the organization's vision; mission; values and achievements.

Conclusion

The paper's findings are that the learning outcomes in an integrative pattern leader development program are richer for the participants than the ones gained in referenced segregated frameworks. This is because the combination of the two conventional leader development program designs into an integrated LDP provided the combined benefits of the two separate designs, while partially mitigated the limitations of both referenced LDP conventional types.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“We can't train tomorrow's leaders with yesterday's leadership training practices. The decade ahead demands a new set of competencies and a revamping of training methods”.

JAYA. CONGER

This chapter covers the main points of an exploration's starting point related to an integrated framework for leader development programs regarded from the participants' experiences point of view. Leader development is of increasing importance, as the need for challenges' resolutions from leaders have been documented across sectors. While leader development programs research notes the didactic classroom based and practice-based oriented initiatives as per their learning outcomes, a holistic view that encompasses both perspectives remains under-explored. In this light, this study aims to cover the research gap presented, relying on data gathered from qualitative interpretative standpoint. Key points are outlined which will guide the remaining chapters, including the literature explored in the next chapter.

Context of the Study

The interest in developing leaders has been increasing in public, private and non-profit sector organizations throughout the world (Ambrose, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Hailey, 2006; Hailey & James, 2004; Getha-Taylor & Ingraham, 2004; Petrie, 2011; PWC Saratoga, 2010). There is a wide recognition about the importance of improving the capabilities of developing leaders (Avolio et al., 2010; Berke et al., 2009; Day, 2001; McCall, 1998; Petrie, 2011; Van Velsor et al., 2010). That is because development of leaders has been associated with the profitable trajectory of organizations regardless of their size or type (Day, 2001) and has been appreciated as a source of competitive advantage (Petrie, 2011; PWC Saratoga, 2010; Van Velsor et al., 2010). This is especially relevant in a fast changing; highly competitive; global business setting where organizations, which aim either to survive or succeed, are suggested to depend on the development of leaders at all levels (Day, 2001; Dess & Picken, 2000; Gilley et al., 2011; Leskiw & Singh, 2007; McCall, 1998; Ready et al., 1994). Therefore, the development of leaders has become a

continuous critical concern of most organizations in order to address effectively the challenges and complex problems of contemporary enterprises across sectors (Dess & Picken, 2000; Galli & Muller-Stewens, 2012; Getha-Taylor & Ingraham, 2004; Hailey & James, 2004).

Interestingly, while there is a distinction between the conceptualisation of leader development and leadership development (Day, 2001) throughout the literature leader development has been frequently addressed as leadership development (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). Although leader development refers to the development of individuals rather than the development of a collective, scholars have regularly been ignoring this “linguistic convention” and have been approaching its implementation accordingly (Dalakoura, 2010; Hartley & Hinksman, 2003, p.14; Iles & Preece, 2006). As a result, the implementation of developing leaders; that is the process under which individuals as “human capital” are developed through related programs, has been commonly labelled as ‘leadership development program’. However, the later would have a different focus addressing the development of leadership as a collective in an organisation (Day, 2001, p.584).

This distinction facilitates the clarification of different perspectives to leadership development, which comprise different methods, implement different types of programmes and entail different outcomes setting different expectations (Hartley & Hinksman, 2003). Our focus in leader development concentrates on the development of individuals and we are regarding it as an “on-going process of personal development” (McDermott et al., 2011, p.358). In that sense, we will be looking at one aspect of leadership development concept; the development of leaders through their participation in development programs (Van Velsor et al., 2010). In this respect we will be addressing hereafter the development programs whose purpose is to develop the individuals as “leader development programs” (LDPs), being aware of the shortage of publications that refer to this process as such.

Despite the wide interest and need documented across sectors in developing leaders, the LDP research is still emerging and various aspects of it remain underexplored (Carroll &

Parker, 2009; McDermott et al., 2011; Sabine & Martin, 2010). Predominant leader development research and practice have been demonstrating a notion of leader development which focuses on an instructive and predetermined pedagogy, which renders the developmental programs' participants passive recipients (Antonacopoulou, 1999; Burke & Collins, 2005; Gherardi et al., 1998; Leskiw & Singh, 2007; Pernick, 2001; Redman, 2011). Additionally, the feature of specified learning outcomes is observed even in the cases where practice-based methods are attempted (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004). Both methods presume the participants will contribute to the organization transferring back the learning outcomes they gained (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004; Tyler, 2004). In that sense the effectiveness of leader development programs may be evaluated as in return on investment (Avolio et al., 2010; Collins & Holton, 2004; Earnest & Black, 2009). Thus, despite the attempts of innovative methods to enhance the implementation of leader development programs, the dominant conception about the design and execution of those efforts is established under a functional perspective (Sabine & Martin, 2010). Consequently, such developmental programs are designed and implemented based on an assumption of "an overly linear and causal relation between pedagogic input and output, learning and application" (Sabine & Martin, 2010, p.610).

It has been argued that leader development is meaningful to be studied only if it is planned and predetermined from the design to the learning outcomes (Avolio et al., 2010; Earnest & Black, 2009; Russon & Reinelt, 2004). While it may seem to be common sense so that LDPs can be measured and evaluated, there are different ways to approach leader development and its value added (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004). Traditionally, questions concerning the optimization of leader development programs are approached especially in terms of strategic design to result in expanding participants' engagement and fulfil the incremental expectations for leaders' achievements (Gentry & Martineau, 2010; McGurk, 2010). This research has been predominantly functionalist, focusing on intentions and outcomes. More recent research is increasingly concerned with experiential learning methods of leader development (Foster et al., 2008; Hughes, 2010; Orr, 2007). In order to make meaningful propositions about how to implement leader

development, we argue that a different dimension of the 'how' needs to be looked at; namely at how both perspectives can be combined in leader development programs and how the combined learning outcomes relate to their goal of developing leaders.

Research Gap

Addressing these issues, a research gap is encountered. While the above approaches have significantly contributed to research in the leader development field, a more holistic interpretative perspective looking at the participant experiences frame and sensemaking processes within which leader development is embedded is widely lacking. McDermott (2011, p.359) confirms that little attention has been given to the "personal developmental processes that leaders go through" for outcomes to be generated from their integrated learning experiences. Scholars report on the dominant research and practice of leader development that the interest is concentrated on the view of LDP participants as a passive recipients of an instructive input and predefined pedagogy (Gherardi et al., 1998; Elkjaer, 2001; Ortenblad, 2002) even in the cases of "interactive and practice-based learning approaches" (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004; Sabine & Martin, 2010, p.610). Hence, despite the attempts for innovative initiatives in LDP application, the contemporary view on LDP design and implementation overly understates the potential of an interpretative prospect (Sabine & Martin, 2010). With this thesis we aim to contribute to this research gap in the leader development field by exploring the angle of how the implementation of a holistic developmental process is understood and made sense of from the participants view.

Research Problem Statement

We are looking at a specific organisation which implements a leader development program and ask how this is understood in practice, drawing upon insights from theory of sensemaking and understanding in narrative ground (Glassner, 2000; Gabriel, 1997; Ligon et al., 2008; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In line with the encountered research gap, Sabine & Martin (2010) state that there is a relative lack of consideration of the learning outcomes of participants in an LDP in respect to their experiences. In particular, they elaborate on what is overlooked: "... a clearer understanding of what participants draw

out of an LDP... There is rich potential here for a research agenda based on participants' talk about their experience" (Sabine & Martin, 2010, p.625). Similarly, there appears to be no study which is particularly concerned with attempting to understand how experiences of a holistic leader development framework that combines two conventional leader development programs, are received and interpreted by those who are principally intended to be impacted – the participants.

Theoretical Contribution

Our theoretical contribution with this research lies in placing the leader development program participants and their subjective understanding as a central feature in exploring an integrative framework of learning. This generates new insights into the implementation of leader development policies through the lens of participants' experiences. The research purpose of this thesis is not to achieve any empirical generalisations but rather to offer practical considerations for the organisation under study as well as elicit certain theoretical insights. Therefore, a study of LDP participants of a global organisation in the non-profit sector which will be referred to into the following as AIESEC forms the empirical basis for the analysis.

Non-profit Leader Development Program

The organisation is a youth-driven non-profit organisation that has been implementing a leader development program over sixty three years, with a presence in "110 countries and territories and with over 60,000 members" (AIESEC International, 2011b, p.4). What makes this organisation unique is the long term leader development experience it offers in a voluntary work environment, where participants are able to develop themselves joining a variety of activities that comprise an experiential learning framework (AIESEC International, 2011a; AIESEC International, 2011b; AIESEC International, 2010; AIESEC International, 2009; AIESEC Mainland of China, 2011). The success of this implementation effort is said to be high, being classified by the number of participants trained (AIESEC International, 2011a; AIESEC International, 2011b; AIESEC International, 2010; AIESEC International, 2009; AIESEC Mainland of China, 2011). However, there has not been relevant feedback or evaluation mechanism regarding the

learning outcomes from this leader development implementation effort. There is a lack of awareness and knowledge about the impact and success on a deeper level, relating more to participants' understanding, sensemaking and development reflection based on their experiences. In that sense, the thesis' practical contribution in terms of providing a feedback mechanism to the organisation inherently informs the theoretical gap mentioned earlier.

Participant Perspective

A participant perspective on leader development program and its implementation efforts shows that the participants can contribute to leader development process by co-producing rather than routinely receiving LDPs learning outcomes (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004; Sabine & Martin, 2010). This perspective reveals an aspect that has to be considered by LDP designers, as if not uncovered it might have a substantial impact on the effectiveness of LDPs (Collins & Holton, 2004). Nevertheless, for this to be addressed, a different perception of LDP design and implementation is required (Sabine & Martin, 2010). More specifically, it is required a different basis and a shift of the conventional view of LDPs as a predetermined event with planned outcomes to LDPs as “open-ended and iterative” processes (Sabine & Martin, 2010, p.625). Hence, this study approaches leader development from the viewpoint of active players who co-create the content of leader development program through their experiences. As such it adopts an intrapersonal emphasis, considering the development as an expedition of experiences for individual leaders (Sabine & Martin, 2010). In that sense, this study will attempt to extend the traditional attention from the transactional and interactive features of leaders development view (Judge & Piccolo, 2004)research to incorporate the constructive sense-making experiences which stimulate the development of leaders (Sabine & Martin, 2010).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to address both the advantages and the limitations of two prevailing approaches concerning the implementation of leader development programmes and explore an integrative pattern of a youth non-profit leader development program

through the lens of the participants' experiences. The prevailing approaches are on one hand the 'classroom based' or 'executive management' oriented leader development programs and on the other hand the experiential learning leader development programs. Both views advocate for leader development effectiveness and both have been previously researched in terms of the evaluation on their learning outcomes and return on investment (Avolio et al., 2010; Earnest & Black, 2009; Peters et al., 2011).

This study adopts an interpretative perspective (Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2009) and underpinned by leader development programs related literature as well as based on empirical research, suggests an integration of both the didactic classroom based and the experiential learning oriented approach in terms of the design and implementation of leader development programmes. In this way this explorative study aims to offer a new insight in the implementation of leader development initiatives.

Research Questions

The guiding question for our empirical exploration, derived by our research purpose, is:

- What is the participant perspective regarding the learning outcomes of a leader development program?

Additionally, the following two sub-questions were addressed, which emerged throughout the study from establishing the connection of theory and empirical material. These questions enabled structuring the findings and stimulated our analysis and discussion.

- How are the learning outcomes compared to the ones gained from the classroom based leader development programs?

- How are the learning outcomes compared to the ones gained from the experiential learning leader development programs?

We are asking these questions under the notion of an interpretative view, which implies that the meaning is socially constructed rather than exists on its own (Uddin &

Hamiduzzaman, 2009). The construction in this light refers to the production of interpretations (Steedman, 1991), which is a result of a socially constructed pre-understanding (Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2009). Thus, addressing these questions, we will be focusing on the understandings and meanings that the participants ascribe to their experiences, acknowledging that their perceptions as well as our interpretations are socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Alvesson et al., 2008; Bryman & Cassell, 2006).

Thesis Outline

The thesis starts with the literature review chapter which will initially present the theoretical background around the leader development topic. Additionally, in this chapter will be described the two prevailing approaches on the implementation of leader development through leader development programs; the didactic classroom based and the experiential learning oriented stressing their benefits and challenges. This will be used as a useful theoretical frame of reference for the proposed consideration of an integrative framework of leader development programs. Following, chapter three will outline the methodological approach that our research is based on, as well as the method that we used to conduct our study. Furthermore, chapter four will delineate our empirical foundation and in particular portray the experiences of participants in a youth non-profit leader development program. Subsequently, an analysis will follow where will be described the themes that emerged around the learning outcomes of the leader development through the participants' experiences. Moreover, the analysis chapter will ensue with discussion points about the main findings, which derived from an iterative process between the themes instigated by the literature and our empirical material. The final chapter will conclude the thesis by summarizing our theoretical contribution, formulating reflections on our study as well as providing recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter discusses the theoretical background of leader development with a particular focus on research related to the leader development programs. Since our study focuses on exploring the development of leaders through their participation in LDPs, it is important to examine the relevant theories surrounding the learning process of individuals in those developmental initiatives. Initially, the first section outlines the theoretical background of leadership development with an emphasis particularly in the development of leaders through their participation in LDPs. The second section concentrates on examining the leadership development programs designed to acquire primarily professional knowledge, stressing the limitations that are portrayed in research. Furthermore, the third section considers an alternative learning process through experiences, describing the theories and criticism this approach entails.

We start this chapter with an examination of what is the interest in leader development and what it involves in order to be able to further draw the link with our empirical findings as per the way it is implemented. Following, the second part narrows down to LDPs which are based on a didactic approach emphasizing on the professional knowledge acquired for the successful execution of executives roles. Furthermore, the third part outlines another perspective of LDPs implementation which builds on participants experiences. These models will provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics in the LDP field, describing basic aspects such as their design, benefits, limitations and challenges. The last section of the chapter sets the agenda for the holistic view on LDPs which will be further examined. This will be helpful as it will enhance our understanding about the meaning of the pattern to be proposed.

Leader Development Through LDPs

The interest in the development of leaders concentrates on the methods that may enhance the knowledge, the skills and the abilities of individuals when assigned with official leadership roles (Day, 2001). This developed leadership capacity enables people's judgment and action towards creative endeavours and innovative ventures (Coleman,

1988; Mumford et al., 2007). In this way, leader development attempts functioning as an intentional investment in aspiring individuals which may later represent the pathway to an organization's successful direction (Conger, 1993). The fundamental emphasis of the principal development strategy has been to build the competences required to form a concrete standard of oneself, which will further enable the individual to engage in leadership responsibilities in a self-directed way (Carroll & Levy, 2010; McClell, 1994; Pardey, 2007; Pearce, 2007). This perception of the "self-as-leader" is considered to determine the individuals' effective performance in a range of leadership organizational roles (Day & Harrison, 2007; Pearce, 2007). Specific examples that illustrate the intrapersonal ability that is associated with the leader development endeavours involve self-consciousness (i.e. emotional intelligence, self-assurance), self-control (i.e. discipline, credibility, flexibility), and self-inspiration (i.e. dedication, creativity, positivity) (Day, 2001; Neck & Manz, 1996; Pearce, 2007; Stewart et al., 1996). These abilities enrich the individuals' knowledge, belief and influence, which have been characterized as crucial qualities of the development of leaders (Berke et al., 2009; Carroll & Parker, 2009; Pearce, 2007; Petrie, 2011).

Leader development has often been equated with leadership development (Dalakoura, 2010; Day, 2001; Rost, 1993). Research work that refers to leadership development, in fact designates leader development analysing the reasons and the methods through which the organizations may enable the development of their executives primarily in terms of their leadership skills (Dalakoura, 2010). Therefore, the debate around the conceptualisation of leader development versus leadership development has emerged as research and practices were structured in response to a prerequisite to connect the leader development with the leadership development (Day, 2001). However, the documented differentiation lies in the basis of the two constructs; as leader development concentrates on enhancing the "human capital" while leadership development aims in forming the "social capital" of an organization (Day, 2001, p.584). This notion derived from organizations' intention and investment towards improving the skills and capabilities of their employees in order to perform effectively in various organizational roles which entailed acting as leaders (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Gilley et al., 2011; Lepak & Snell,

1999). Thus, this purposeful endeavour to develop individuals as leaders was considered to address the human resources of organizations (Lepak & Snell, 1999). More specifically, leader development is currently understood as an “aspect of a broader process of leadership development” which is defined as “an expansion of a collective’s capacity to produce direction, alignment and commitment”; hence the latter departs from the process under which individuals learn and grow as leaders (Van Velsor et al., 2010, p.20).

Despite the theoretical differences that distinct leader development from leadership development, scholars suggest that operate complementary throughout a developmental program (Carroll & Parker, 2009; Dalakoura, 2010; Day, 2001; Iles & Preece, 2006). This means that the development of leaders does not moderate the development of leadership (Day, 2001). Both processes are considered indispensable in a systematic endeavour to optimize the effectiveness of an organization (Day, 2001). The view of leadership as a “complex interaction” between the leader and the organizational setting translates into the implementation of leader development program, as the principles of the environment of such endeavour may enhance or diminish the development outcome (Fiedler, 1996, p.241). Therefore, instead of LDPs attempting to formulate intellectual and creative leaders, the belief that designing frameworks which allow leaders to employ their intellectual skills, knowledge and experience is of substantial practical importance (Fiedler, 1996). Hence, in line with the approach that appreciates leader and leadership development as a continuum, this study acknowledges that participants in leader development programs find reflections of leadership development in different phases of developmental process (Carroll & Parker, 2009). In such case, the expectation of achieving extensive positive impact on individuals’ performance following their participation in LDPs can be fulfilled depending on the organizational environment the individuals operate in (Conger, 1993; Day, 2001; McClell, 1994).

The efforts on developing leaders are illustrated through the implementation of leader development programs. Organizations have been investing considerable resources in leadership development particularly with an emphasis on developing individuals through their participation in LDPs (Avolio, 2010; Collins & Holton, 2004; Earnest & Black,

2009; Foster et al., 2008; Hailey & James, 2004; Carroll et al., 2008; PWC Saratoga, 2010). Developing leaders' capabilities has been considered to relying largely on learning (Van Velsor et al., 2010). In this respect, developing leaders is conducted through various activities and experiences (Day, 2001). The methods formed to develop leaders are several and vary in purpose, design, practices and duration (Collins & Holton, 2004; Day, 2001). One dominant approach of LDPs implementation is the one offering classroom-based training, which is considered to be the traditional one (Lyne & Kennedy, 2011). According to (Hernez - Broome & Hughes, 2004, p.25) "Classroom-type leadership training—for long the primary formal development mode—is now complemented (or even supplanted) by activities as diverse as high ropes courses or reflective journaling". Both approaches seem to be oriented around acquiring competences which can be 'in a sense, universally translatable to most aspects of life and work' (Van Velsor et al., 2010).

Throughout the body of literature scholars have distinguished the development of leaders from the development of managers (Day, 2001; Probert & Turnbull, 2011; Rost, 1993). According to Rost (1993, p.100) the development of managers refers to the "industrial paradigm" while the development of leaders refers to the "postindustrial paradigm". Respective research places in parallel the concepts of leader and management development but also highlights their occasional overlapping (Day, 2001). Leader development and management development are associated but have different focus (Rost, 1993). On one hand, managers' development principally refers to the process in which individuals gain knowledge regarding the way of operating effectively in management roles which involve handling tasks aiming to improve performance (Probert & Turnbull, 2011). One example of this is the developmental training programs for executives in order to improve their presentation skills. Therefore, management development concerns acquiring expertise in specific knowledge areas which relate to effectively carrying out the attributes of managerial roles (Austin et al., 2011; Collins & Holton, 2004; Pernick, 2001). Common feature of the developing managers' process is the use of verified models to address solving problems and the application of practices that are linked to established managerial roles (Pernick, 2001).

On the other hand leaders' development is suggested to be a process that enables individuals to grow by finding meaningful ways to approach the challenges in an organisational setting and achieve working with others in order to attain a goal (Keys & Wolfe, 1988). The differentiation from managers' development process lies in the fact that managers' development is suggested to be about operating under more standard role specifications (Keys & Wolfe, 1988). In that sense, the developing of leaders involves building the capacity of people to finding their own solution to unforeseen circumstances (Dixon, 1993) and be able to develop out-of the box ways of approaching undertakings (Keys & Wolfe, 1988). This is despite the expense of possibly disordering the organizational structures and the associated effect of potential failure which is attached to stepping out of comfort zone (Weick, 1993). Therefore, this process involves a great complexity and requires continuous adaptability in order to address a wide range of challenges. Hence, LDPs that aim to build the capability of addressing anticipated circumstances are considered to be working towards a simplistic endeavour (Hooijberg et al., 1997).

Following, the debate on the conceptualisation of the leadership and leader development constructs is transferred in the discussion of whether LDPs are eventually developing managers or leaders. It is interesting to see how the LDPs are designed and how they are carried through in order to fulfil their aim of developing leaders. Both management development approach and leadership development approach have in common the drive of enhancing individuals' skills (Rost, 1993). Nonetheless, it seems that the application of the development effort is the parameter that designates the quality of the development outcome (Dixon, 1993; Keys & Wolfe, 1988).

LDPs advocate they have in place the tools and the processes required to create 'better leaders'. Their purpose is to prepare, train and engage their participants (Redman, 2011). The programs are focusing on the development of individuals mostly with regards to the appropriate behaviours and skills that will result in their progressing in the organizations' hierarchies (Redman, 2011). Participants are normally trained within the performance management cycles of organizational settings, which entail specific instructions as per how is required act (Carroll & Parker, 2009). More specifically, LDPs support to offer a

detailed platform of activities the participants are supposed to follow in order to further help the organization process innovation and for them to achieve personal growth (Avolio et al., 2010; Osburn et al., 2011).

LDPs – Didactic Classroom Based

The development of leaders' competences is a perspective that stems from research around the identification of individuals behaviours and skills that rendered them successful leaders (Rost, 1993). This view supports that the learning process which results in the development of efficient leaders involves a sound foundation of theoretical understanding and techniques in order to perform as leaders (Day & Harrison, 2007). In this case therefore, the development refers to the process in which individuals develop competences regarding operating effectively in executive roles which involve undertaking assignments aiming to improve performance (Probert & Turnbull, 2011). The dominant attempt in this direction; of LDPs offering the development of skills are the didactic or classroom based LDPs (Cornforth et al., 2007). Such initiatives emphasize on acquiring expertise in specific knowledge areas which relate to effectively carrying out attributes of managerial roles (Austin et al., 2011; Collins & Holton, 2004; Pernick, 2001). The main aspired learning outcome is the development individuals in order to be able to apply of practices that are linked to improve performance (Pernick, 2001).

Classroom based activities plan consists of various elements and incorporates modules of competency framework; performance management; inspirational leadership; management courses; education around handling every day's tasks (Redman, 2011). Within this setting is outlined a succession plan in order to support the participants on their effort to achieve specific goals and further progress in the organization (Johnson, 2010). Additionally, a behavioural basis is set in order to provide understanding of the appropriate path to success and a reflection of the method to work towards (Collins & Holton, 2004). There is a special emphasis on the managerial skills as a central aspect of to be attained in order to managing the organization's strategic issues and communicating them to team members (Redman, 2011). Therefore, the learning attribute of this phase concentrates on the acquired skills pertinent to handling efficiently challenging business issues (Collins & Holton, 2004; Foster et al., 2008) . This training process is advocated to ensure building confidence around managing the social relationships of working environment, addressing problems with the knowledge on human resources management practices (Dale Carnegie

Training, 2011; Leadership Institute, 2012; Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012; The Leaders Institute, 2012).

The design of didactic classroom based LDPs is primarily classroom based and the pattern followed may involve lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences or simulations (Leskiw & Singh, 2007; Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011). These executive management LDPs are typically short term and may be structured in phases, parts or course cycles of few consecutive days or weeks (Dale Carnegie Training, 2011; Leadership Institute, 2012; Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012; The Leaders Institute, 2012). Participation is normally granted to professionals in present or future executive positions which aim to develop themselves in order to advance in hierarchy, become vital part of the organisation's future (Johnson, 2010). Participants attain expertise over addressing responsibilities, practicing processes, designing sustainable successive procedures (Dale Carnegie Training, 2011; Leadership Institute, 2012; Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012; The Leaders Institute, 2012). The participants are having the opportunity to learn up-to-date management trends and improve their skills in interactive lectures and seminars (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Johnson, 2010; McClell, 1994).

In most training programs tuition is required (Dale Carnegie Training, 2011; Leadership Institute, 2012; Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012; The Leaders Institute, 2012). Expenses may be covered by organizations which invest in their employees' training in order to increase their effectiveness, retain talented employees, as well as maintain profitability and competitive advantage in the market (Ambrose, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Hailey, 2006; Hailey & James, 2004; Getha-Taylor & Ingraham, 2004; Petrie, 2011; PWC Saratoga, 2010). Didactic classroom based LDPs respond to the need for return on investment estimation by advocating to provide competitive advantage methods, innovative marketing conceptualisation techniques, significant input for operational and financial management, proven analytical tools and strategy formulation (Dale Carnegie Training, 2011; Leadership Institute, 2012; Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012; The Leaders Institute, 2012). LDPs suggest offering the pathway for developing successful leaders in a fast track way ensuring the return on investment (Pernick, 2001; University of North Carolina, 2012).

An example of the detailed outcomes LDPs advocate to provide is the following: “results-driven and effectively developing flexibility, resilience, time stress management skills, work-life balance, physical-emotional fitness, professional competency excellence, accountability, sound ethics, exemplary character, requisite professional competencies, personal security safety- survival readiness, problem solving ability, decisiveness, technical credibility, openness, creativity and career-savvy” (Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012, p.2) and even more: “survival readiness, competency-capability excellence, human capital management, rational efficiency / effectiveness, customer- focus, profit-orientation, conflict management and resolution skills, leveraging diversity, effective technology utilization, developing others, team building, emotional-social-business IQ.... optimizing multi-stakeholder value, maximizing shareholder value, cost-leadership, management control, leading change, competency-capabilities actualization, corporate security-safety-survival readiness, strategic thinking, vision, partnering, political savvy, influencing/negotiating, building coalitions” (Masterpreneurship Institute, 2012, p.3). The skills practiced within the programs are fewer and include: “public speaking, listening and communicating, people skills and how to motivate people, memory, problem-solving, meeting skills, and the ability to develop more leaders within the organization” (The Leaders Institute, 2012).

An advantage of classroom based LDPs is that they can be universally applicable, due to their abstract and setting-independent nature (Lyne & Kennedy, 2011). This renders them easy to follow and familiarise for most participants (Carroll et al., 2008). Therefore, participants who would not appreciate unconventional methods would feel more comfortable to take part in this type of experience (Carroll et al., 2008). In addition, the activities offered are regarded as powerful learning professional tools for addressing specific organisational demanding circumstances which require professional expertise (Foster et al., 2008). More specifically, the individuals gain a better understanding of the complications in working life and learn techniques regarding meeting the organisation’s strategic goals through the implementation of organisations’ strategic goals (Collins & Holton, 2004). Moreover, participants who in their majority are suggested to be executives are able to attend without the distractions of their roles’ responsibilities which

changes the dynamics in terms of the learning assimilation results (Collins & Holton, 2004). Didactic LDPs may also enhance learning as the LDPs are operating as a community of practice where participants acquire motivation and discover other variables of already used approaches (Cornforth et al., 2007).

At the same time the universal applicability of the classroom based LDPs may constitute a limitation in the sense that it presents a difficulty in converting according to the context which renders the individuals detached from others and settings (Carroll et al., 2008). Hence, even though the programs advocate offering up-to-date knowledge regarding handling a variety of challenging circumstances, in fact the input offered refers to handling specific circumstances through proven models of behaviours and responsibilities (Carroll et al., 2008). This contradicts with the narrative supporting that this approach contributes to enabling the developing leaders becoming adaptable and creative in order to manage unforeseen circumstances, as classroom based approach does not seem to serve the suggested objective (Grugulis, 2000; Loan-Clarke, 1996).

Additionally, didactic LDPs are short-term and therefore, this pattern has been criticised not to provide sustainable outcomes (Leskiw & Singh, 2007). In particular, following the completion of the courses the participants can 'lose' most of LDPs input since they don't get to apply the knowledge they gained to practice. Therefore, the absence of practicing problem solving into 'real' business problems (Leskiw & Singh, 2007) is an element that reduces the effect of didactic LDPs (Foster et al., 2008). Furthermore, the input that is provided is so condensed that it is hard for the participants to assimilate (Foster et al., 2008). Furthermore, the participation in LDPs is supposed to entail pursuing 'new' knowledge which enables innovative thinking (Osburn et al., 2011). However, since didactic LDPs are relying on predefined models and proven techniques, there is a question of how 'new' knowledge is provided (Carroll et al., 2008). Moreover, didactic LDPs are operating under the notion that these predefined practices will bring future growth for leaders. However, the competency based frameworks and disciplinary procedures (Townley, 2002) preserve an idealistic view of handling situations which can hardly be tested or evaluated in this setting (Carroll et al., 2008). Consequently, they

become dominant as there is little space for explicit examination, reflection and assessment (Carroll & Parker, 2009).

LDPs - Experiential Learning Based

'Experience is not so much what happens to you as what you make of what happens to you'

Aldous Huxley

The development of leaders through experiences is an approach that has emerged over research around the identification of events that had major impact on the way individuals lead (Van Velsor et al., 2010). This perspective suggests that the learning process which results in the development of effective leaders involves a variety of experiences which relate to encountering challenges (Van Velsor et al., 2010). McCall (2004, p.127) stresses "The primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience. The role played by training and other formal programs is relatively modest in comparison to other kinds of experiences". Therefore, this view of leader development throughout experience is opposing to widely embedded beliefs on the meaning of learning which correlate learning to a didactic process (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). Furthermore, this approach proposes that learning derives from experience; thus, questions the knowledge acquired in a highly controlled environment such as a classroom in the case of leader development initiatives (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). In particular, the scepticism concentrates on the extent to which the didactic approach may offer the development of skills, problem solving abilities and achieving goals orientation (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). Rather, leader development through experience perspective supports that the learning output involves adaptability to change, deeper understanding of management roles, and development of a leader mindset (Austin et al., 2011).

The value of leader development through experiences is documented across various theoretical approaches and empirical illustrations (Derue & Wellman, 2009). Scholars who developed experiential learning theories and models (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1990; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Schön, 1983), despite their diverse theoretical, philosophical and functional background, emphasize the potential of individuals to learn as they engage in incidental assignments as well as experiences within or outside of their working environment (Larsen, 2004). Additionally, the learning potential of formal

developmental activities is specifically referenced to enable individuals' development towards improving their performance (Larsen, 2004).

Learning opportunities in experiential learning setting are documented to involve accidental opportunities, where the attention is primarily in fulfilling the task rather than developing and the on-the-job experiences, where the individuals learn through practicing assignments (Larsen, 2004). Accidental opportunities are inherently not structured and planned and comprise a part of on-going work, therefore the learning outcome is direct, powerful and sustainable (Carroll & Parker, 2009; Larsen, 2004; Cornforth et al., 2007). In the case of on-the-job assignments participants learn by doing (Freed et al., 2010), therefore this experience has been characterised 'real' and its learning impact more meaningful (Larsen, 2004). The experiences of the participants in this environment is suggested to require active use of the skills, therefore the struggles (Derue & Wellman, 2009) and learning process is suggested to be realised thoroughly (Thomas & Cheese, 2005). Inevitably, the participants are making use of their sensemaking further than predefined principles (Thomas & Cheese, 2005).

LDPs which are emphasizing learning from experience are employing practices which are embedded in on-going work and require a long-term participant engagement (Bevan & Kipka, 2012; Freed et al., 2010; McDermott et al., 2011; Osburn et al., 2011). Specific practices examples employed are 'networking', 'job assignments', 'mentoring', 'coaching', 'action learning' and '360-degree feedback' (Day, 2001, p.587; Hernez - Broome & Hughes, 2004, p.25). In this case the importance concentrates of the participants' experiences in fulfilling projects in actual organisational circumstances and therefore developing the skills and leader capabilities being exposed to materialised challenges. In contradiction, the characterised artificial learning is illustrated in the implementation of fast track classroom based LDPs, where learning derives from totally different means (Larsen, 2004).

Experiential learning participants have been documenting practical experiences as very influential and pragmatic in the direction of preparing them for leadership roles (Foster et al., 2008; Foster et al., 2008). In particular, they report on their development as being

significant and that their later performance being substantial impacted in a positive way (Laljani, 2009; Larsen, 2004; Thomas & Cheese, 2005). Additionally, it is maintained that a wide range of leaders; entrepreneurs; executives, social activists as well as politicians assert to have learned more from ‘real world’ experiences than didactic type LDPs (Thomas & Cheese, 2005). As it is highlighted the classroom based LDPs have contributed to acquiring technical expertise, while from the experiential LDPs have obtained fundamental understanding about the leader role (Thomas & Cheese, 2005).

Following, the experiential based LDPs are considered to foster resilience, as in this situation participants learn to demonstrate their competences encountering challenging situations, confront their fears and uncertainties as well as reacting to failure (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). In this setting then, the participants boost their self-confidence, obtain self-awareness and reflect on their actions (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Larsen, 2004). The importance of this learning outcome rests in the adaptability and efficient management of stressful circumstances as well as crises management (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Foster et al., 2008; Orr, 2007). This capabilities toolbox that leaders achieve over experience results in a self-directness and consciousness (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). Furthermore, the optimism and confidence built over the participation is exercised based on successful accomplishment of tasks (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). Moreover, the participants gain emotional intelligence reflecting on their actions and emotions and this way increasing their performance by incorporating another insight of the leader role (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Foster et al., 2008; Orr, 2007).

Whereas, learning from experience has been documented as beneficial, at the same time there is a difficulty in assessing its impact (Van Velsor et al., 2010). Most LDPs are assessed with regards to their financial return of investment (Avolio et al., 2010; Abrell et al., 2011; McGurk, 2010; Peters et al., 2011). In the case of the LDPs that are based on experiential learning, their outcome is intangible and “more qualitative in nature”, therefore measuring the outcome in precise is problematic (Van Velsor et al., 2010, p.81). The reported need to establish a cause and effect relationship between the

implementation of leader development efforts and their learning outcomes, illustrates the emphasis on determining effectiveness, measuring performance and verifying development (Collins & Holton, 2004). In this respect are documented propositions to form a return on experience framework which would offer a validation and demonstration of attained outcomes from such initiatives (Van Velsor et al., 2010). Hence, the learning outcomes of LDPs oriented around their participants' experiences are encompassed largely by ambiguity and can hardly be objective and precise, which constitutes a limitation as per the measurement of their impact.

Another factor that limits the implementation of an LDP based on experiential learning is that it requires the engagement and commitment of the participants (Hughes, 2010). It may be argued that this is assumed to pre-exist before the LDP actually begins, which questions the design of those initiatives. In fact the actual execution of this LDP type depends on the participants' willingness to be open to reflection and cooperate with their peers (Hughes, 2010); therefore every experiential LDP attempt is considered to be beneficial beforehand, whilst it may not encompass the prerequisites for its effective trajectory. Additionally, learning through encountering challenging circumstances is considered to be valuable in terms of learning outcomes but at the same time it seems to lack obvious concrete productive outcomes in the cases which are too challenging to be handled and participants 'fail' to correspond to (Derue & Wellman, 2009; Foster et al., 2008; Hughes, 2010). This is due to the fact that the success in this situation is attached to engaging the experience in a predefined manner. Furthermore, developing leaders from on-the-job experience involves practicing problem solving and discovering the meaning behind the specifications of a precise issue to be solved (Hughes, 2010). Nonetheless, this still focuses on illustrating much more the short-term learning outcome of the experience rather than the long term impact on the understanding of the participants (Foster et al., 2008). Hence, the respondents of the LDP experiences although it is advocated that the knowledge they gain out of their participation is more rounded than the formal leader development courses (Thomas & Cheese, 2005), the reported learning outcomes are still in relation to a predetermined design of experience achievements.

Moreover, the experiential learning process in LDPs through informal unintended undertakings (Laljani, 2009) presents considerable limitations as the inherent characteristic of them which is that they occur in a spontaneous and unsystematic way, is responsible for being partially recognised and remaining up to a point unconscious (Mumford, 1995). Thus, the learning process of incidental activities (Mumford, 1996) presents difficulties in them being perceived developmental and the learning outcomes to be recognised (Boud & Middleton, 2003) and consciously be absorbed by LDPs participants (Laljani, 2009). More specifically, this informal learning process has been viewed as a component of the procedure of completing a task and that the importance of the sense-making is moderated (Boud & Middleton, 2003). The particular learning process has been also characterised to be unsafe regarding its pedagogy due to the total lack of direction which may cause the feeling of inadequacy and frustration to participants, therefore have the opposite result of development (Conlon, 2004). Nevertheless, another view suggests that this feeling may be mitigated by the support of peers or a mentor (Laljani, 2009). Experiential learning LDPs offer their participants knowledge of implicit rather than explicit nature in order to develop insights about their roles as leaders which comprises a benefit or a limitation depending on the participants' disposition as well (Laljani, 2009).

A Holistic Approach

Taking under consideration both the benefits and limitations of the examined LDP types, it is interesting to examine the case of an LDP which incorporates the competences and experiences orientation while at the same time departs from specific expectations as per the learning outcomes (Barker, 1997; Hirst et al., 2004). In this situation it will be explored if the cause and effect relation is considered as a partial aspect of the whole broader leader development framework (Barker, 1997). The examination will primarily investigate the comprehensive development of participants in terms of their learning outcomes and their awareness regarding the effectiveness of their experiences (Foster et al., 2008). The basic idea is that leader development is not a linear process, therefore presuming that its meaning and its realisation lie in predetermined and controlled patterns implies excluding an essential ingredient; that is the potential of individuals'

sensemaking without imposed patterns. Nevertheless, this approach entails benefits and limitations as well, which will be further described and analysed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter lays out the ontological and epistemological considerations and how they determine the research methods used in this study. Also, the research design and process is described in detail.

Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

Methodology is the explanation and justification for using certain methods used in the research and evaluating them according to the resources, limitations and pre-understandings of the researchers (Carter & Little, 2007). The ontology, is described as the “assumptions that we make about the nature of reality” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002, p.31) and concerns “whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perception and actions of social actors” (Bryman, 2008, p.18).

In the context of our research, we view the accounts of reality as constructed by the actors who filter the facts, information and experiences through their subjective lens of understanding the life-world (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Moreover, the understanding of the reality is also formed by the communication and interactions with other people and (socially constructed) entities (Sandberg & Targama, 2007), such as the organisation we will be studying. This consideration of individual perceptions of the reality is taken into account in our research design by acknowledging that the stories of the leadership development program participants reflect their perception of the experiences, not the actual reality, however, these experiences are important to explore to gain understanding of the LDP processes and outcomes that cannot be objectively be measured in other ways.

The epistemology is described as the “general set of assumptions about the best way of inquiring into the nature of the world” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002, p.31). From the positivist perspective, the social science aims to acquire explanatory and predictive knowledge about the external world and produce general statements, describing the

observed relationships (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2009). This approach is criticised by interpretivists as not being able to tackle abstract concepts that are beyond the observable facts and causal relationships (Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2009). The interpretative perspective does not aim to make statistical or axiomatic generalisations; however, the openness of this approach can lead to 'moderatum' generalisations that are valid in the given context and circumstances (Williams, 2000). The aim of this explorative study is to discover the practical implementation of the LDP which combines experiential learning and competency based training and offer directions for further research.

Research Design

The methodology of a research is largely determined by the assumptions about “how the world is” and the understanding on the best way to inquire about this reality and the methods of the research follow directly from these assumptions. Adopting an interpretative perspective implies working with qualitative research methods and requires an on-going process of working with the theoretical and the empirical material, accounting for the impact of pre-understandings of the researchers and study participants on the interpretations as well as the influence of the circumstances of the interview, use of language, and role of the interviewer (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Cassell, 2005). Such on-going combined look at the “parts and the whole” is achieved through objective and alethic hermeneutics (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) which considers the 'text' independently from its agent and enables analysing the relevance of the data beyond its immediate context (Czarniawska, 2004).

For the purpose of gaining insight into subjective accounts of experiences of the leadership development program participants we chose interviewing as the main method for the collection of data. The stories of personal experiences are mirrored through stories that are not expected to be direct recitals of the experiences, but instead a mixture of the events and the assigned meanings to those events; a constructed reality (Ligon et al., 2008). These individual accounts of reality give the events and actions a subjective meaning that is used to develop the construct of leadership development as well as assign

value to the overall experience within the program (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). These stories are analysed in relation with the context, creating a text that provides a combined view on the experiences within the LDP (Czarniawska, 2004). To gather insights that are possibly closer to the individual experiences and to discover the meanings assigned, we have used a framework of semi-structured interviews to guide the questions. Also, following the hermeneutical circle which relates the parts of the data to the whole (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), this allowed for following up on salient expressions and parts of the story, which could provide additional themes for the overall description of the LDP experiences.

This semi-structured design of the interviews was well supported by the chosen method of conducting the surveys – online interviews, which are in essence very similar to the more traditional method of phone interviewing. Such kind of interviewing has the benefit of naturally creating a narrative through the interaction between the interviewer and the study participant, without the distraction of non-verbal communication, which would be difficult to document (Cachia & Millward, 2011). In addition to that, online interviewing allowed us to interview individuals from across Europe, thus gaining a more diverse view on how the leadership development program is implemented and experienced within the organisation. The major drawback of this approach is the impersonality of a phone call, due of the lack of non-verbal and informal communication (Cachia & Millward, 2011); the ways to overcome these drawbacks will be described in the section about reflexivity in the research.

A review of written documentation, for example, of annual reports, website information and the leader development program guidelines, we have used as a secondary source of data, mainly to gather information about the organisation and its leader development program. This material was used to gain pre-understanding about the LDP as well as to design the initial interview guidelines. The documentation however will not be considered as primary data, because this study aims to discover personal experiences and LDP learning outcomes as perceived by the study participants.

Research Process

The empirical data for this research was gathered through open-ended online interviews with the participants of the AIESEC leadership development program as well as via relevant documentation produced by the non-profit organisation. The documentation about the organisation and its leadership development program was reviewed to gain understanding about the organisational structures and processes. The materials describing the leadership program provided insights to the leadership development discourse used in AIESEC and served the purpose of understanding the intended development program design and to form the preliminary interview questions about the LDP experiences. However, the main empirical data used in this study was obtained through the open-ended interviews conducted with the program participants. To be selected for this study, the participants had to have at least one year of leadership experience at a local level of AIESEC; two thirds of the interviewees had been in the leadership body of the organisation for 2 years or more. Half of them were planning to continue their leadership development experience for at least another year and had applied to another position, at either national or international level. We must acknowledge, however, that an important exclusion from the sample are the organisation members who have not successfully finished a one-year term of leadership experience within AIESEC, therefore possibly limiting the stories towards more success stories. From the researcher's personal experience, it can be up to one out of 7 people who drop out of the LDP during the year of the program. However, the study participants were including stories about the other members leaving the program, and we will cover this theme within the empirical material chapter.

Initially, a request for interviews with the leaders at a local level was sent out to 23 European countries. This request was then forwarded to the local offices and seven out of the total of the 16 study participants interviewed contacted us after receiving this request. However, the response rate was considerably low, and the rest of the correspondents were contacted through convenience sampling. This sampling method is used for qualitative research, especially explorative studies, that focus on the specific experiences of the participants (Bernard, 2000). All of the organisation members contacted had been local

committee presidents during the term 2010-2011 and had participated in an international European AIESEC conference in 2010, following which they became participants of a social networking group online, through which they were contacted. The response rate to this type of communication was much higher, and about a half of the contacted people agreed to give an interview.

All of the study participants, 7 male and 9 female, were in their early twenties, recent graduates from or still students at a higher education institution in the city which their local leadership development program experience was taking place. The countries represented in the sample are Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Romania, The United Kingdom, and Ukraine. Even though the way the local operations are run and the size of each national AIESEC membership body vary among these countries, the basic design of the leadership development program remains the same across the whole sample and the stories had common themes in spite the geographical distance and diverse cultural backgrounds.

In total, during a one-month period, 16 interviews were conducted via online conference calls with either one or both of the researchers and one interviewee present at a time. Each interview was approximately from 30 to 50 minutes long and was recorded and transcribed for further analysis (Appendix 2). All of the interviews were conducted in English and although it was the native language of only two participants, it was not a major obstacle for communication, as this is the official language of AIESEC and is used throughout of the organisation. The interview guidelines included six initial questions (Appendix 1), which were loosely followed to advance the conversation. These questions supplemented with follow-up questions, depending on the context to discover more salient experiences. The narrative was interpreted immediately conducting each interview by the researchers to identify the meanings of the story and how this additional data fits into the overall research material, following the hermeneutic cycle of relating the part of the text (narrative) to the whole body of the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p.92). The overarching themes were noted for the following closer analysis and new possible ways of evolving the research were discussed through the process of reflection, which aimed to “question weaknesses inherent in the mode of thought one

embraces". The transcriptions of these stories were later analysed to interpret the meanings of the lived experiences of the interviewees through the emergent themes (Van Manen, 1997, p.88).

Credibility of the Study

The traditional quantitative study aim of validity is to produce certainty, but in qualitative methods there is a lot of uncertainty, which comes from the understanding that the data is a subjective representation of the experiences rather than objective and measurable observations. Triangulation of data is almost impossible to achieve for storytelling-based research because the accounts are very personal and not documented (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.91). In a qualitative study, credibility is established by the data representativeness of the whole, which lies in the interpretation of the experience that would be immediately recognised by people who also have the same experience (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This is achieved by thoroughly describing the data gathering and analysis processes by showing the trail of decisions during the research process, by discussing the interpretations of the data, and by continuous reflexivity, which highlights the self-awareness of the researcher in the particular research context.

A Reflexive Approach

The reflexivity and awareness of biases and assumptions is emphasized by the researchers in the organization and management field, especially regarding its meaning in the context of qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Alvesson et al., 2008; Bryman & Cassell, 2006; Lynch, 2000; Pels, 2000; Weick, 2002). Being reflexive is opposed to the conventional social science practice to provide an unequivocal, objective view of the world (Cunliffe, 2003). Across the spectrum of qualitative research, many different types of reflexivities are practised (Alvesson et al., 2008; Finlay, 2002; Pels, 2000; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). However, all reflexivity types refer to the significance of the researcher's role in research process good in terms of becoming aware about the philosophical positions and assumptions one holds during fieldwork (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Bryman & Cassell, 2006). This means that the philosophical stance and any kind of pre-understanding the researcher holds, implicates him/her in data collection

and interpretation process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Therefore, being reflexive and aware of biases and assumptions means to recognise the philosophical commitment and any kind of predisposition held during research work (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The importance of being reflexive and aware about the predispositions the researcher holds lies in the contribution these provide in qualitative research (Alvesson et al., 2008; Finlay, 2002; Pels, 2000; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). Reflecting and acknowledging biases provide credentials in qualitative research illustrating an improvement in the conditions the research was conducted (Alvesson et al., 2008). Following, this method provides further insights to scholars contradicting and challenging static types of logic and fixed positions, offering an enhanced research outcome (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Reflexivity Throughout the Research Process

One of the authors of this study has been a member of the studied organisation since 2007 and has been a participant of the leadership development program for 2 years herself. This experience has been very impactful in forming her understanding of leadership development and has largely determined the choice of the study topic as well as the design of this research. On one hand, being immersed in the organisation gives a more “native” look at the stories of the study participants, allowing picking up on relevant stories and interesting metaphors to explore them deeper. Sharing a similar experience, Liga was able to ask questions that encouraged the respondents' reflection on their experiences and produced stories, which represented the experience of the participants. Also, being a part of the organisation helped in communicating with the members of AIESEC. As described in the research process description, initially when posing ourselves as researchers for master thesis, the response rate to the interview requests was rather low, and even the national offices of AIESEC had to be contacted several times and oftentimes had to be persuaded before they forwarded the request to their members. When presenting the researcher as a member of the organisation and using the social networking platform for contacting the potential participants, they were much more likely to respond. Another benefit from sharing a similar experience was the ease of rapport building with the study participants, which let them ‘open up’ and share more personal

stories. Another helpful factor was that they were able to use “AIESEC language” – abbreviations and jargon terms that are used specifically within the organisation. This ensured much more fluid flow of the story, as this was the way they are used to speak in their daily work life at AIESEC. During the interviews, common questions were: “Are you an AIESECer?”, “What was your role/experience in AIESEC?” Providing answers to these questions assured the interviewees that the researcher would understand what they were telling her as well as provided basis for more free and conversational interview.

The comparatively long experience at AIESEC could have implied some sort of power relation to the members who are not that experienced within the organisation and a concern for lack of confidentiality. These challenges were acknowledged beforehand and met by the study design and the way of communication towards the participants. We deliberately did not interview participants from Sweden and Latvia, where Liga had gone through the leadership development experiences and had more close relationships with the members of the organisation. Her experience in AIESEC was not stressed in any kind of way when contacting the potential participants of the study by the emails forwarded to them by the national offices. The other part of the interviewees, who were contacted via the social networking platform, shared the same experience as the author, leading a local chapter of the organisation in term 2010-2011, and most of them had held national level positions the year after, mitigating the power relationship issues. The most important way to improve the objectivity of the study was working together with a researcher who had not been involved in the organisation at all and had an external point of view. These views – insider and outsider – combined, have perhaps led to even more insightful research by combining the understandings of the data for interpreting the experiences of the LDP participants and further analysis and comparison to the conventional and more researched leadership development programs.

Chapter 4: Empirical Material

In this section our aim is to explore the experiences of the AIESEC leadership development program participants. This exploration is guided by the main research question: *What is the participant perspective regarding the learning outcomes of a leader development program?* We bring forward the insights into the accounts of the learning experiences of the LDP participants, their reflections on the open-ended LDP design and the main learning outcomes. We also look into the challenges of this development program that the participants have faced throughout their development. We will do this by firstly describing the student non-profit organisation AIESEC and the design of its Leader Development Program. Following, we present the emergent themes from the interviews with the program participants.

AIESEC as an Organisation

AIESEC is the largest non-profit organisation lead by students, currently operates in over 110 countries and territories and has been established in 1948 as Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (International Association of Economics and Commerce Students); however, nowadays the name AIESEC is no longer regarded as an acronym, because the organisation has expanded its membership to students of other study fields (AIESEC International, 2011a). The organisation is growing in size steadily, from over 22.000 members in year 2006 to over 61.000 members in year 2011, with members from every part of the world - Central & Eastern Europe (28%), Asia Pacific (29%), IberoAmerica (21%), Western Europe & North America (24%), Africa (7%), and Middle East & North Africa (4%) (AIESEC International, 2011), making it a global organisation (AIESEC org, 2011). The members of the organisation are students or recent graduates, making it the largest student-run organisation in the world (AIESEC International, 2011a). AIESEC offers 4 membership programs, two of which are related to international exchange opportunities through the “Global internship program” or the “Global community development program”, and the other two running the operations of the organisation - “Team member program” and

“Team leader program” (AIESEC International, 2011a). The latter is the LDP, which will be studied in this research paper and described in more detail later in this chapter.

The sustainable successful operations of the organisation depend largely on the LDP participants because they form the leadership body of AIESEC at local, national and international levels (AIESEC International, 2011c). Therefore, much emphasis is being placed on ensuring that the recruited members of the organisation could actually advance to the LDP stage after a year of being a team member; however, the team leaders can also be recruited externally (AIESEC International, 2011c). According to the value proposition for the participants of the program, AIESEC LDP is “a practical team leader experience to gain personal and professional development. The overall experience needs to give an entrepreneurial and responsible attitude towards being a better leader.” (AIESEC International, 2011c). This highlights several aspects of how the AIESEC LDP is being communicated to its participants, and in essence, its basic assumptions: focus on the experience of a person which will provide value to the participant; seeing the LDP able to provide development at both a personal and professional levels; and promoting a certain view of a “better leader” being entrepreneurial and responsible.

Leader Development Program Design

AIESEC claims to provide a “platform for leadership development” through the four membership programs (AIESEC International, 2011a), but most notably, the team leader program is the one aimed to develop the young leaders. This LDP has been developed with the purpose to provide its participants with the competences of “Global Mindset, Entrepreneurial Outlook, Social Responsibility, Emotional Intelligence and Proactive Learning” (AIESEC Mainland of China, 2011). The program is based around practical experience of managing a team through which the LDP participants contribute to the development of their team members while running the operations of AIESEC. In 2011, there were over 20.000 leadership opportunities offered throughout the AIESEC network. While most of these assignments last for a term of one year, such as taking up a role within the leadership body of a local or national committee of the organisation, the team leader experience can also be only 2 months long (AIESEC International, 2011c). For

example, the experience of working on organising a learning event for the organisation members (AIESEC International, 2011c). This is provided that the LDP participant is leading at least 3 people in the team for a particular period of time (AIESEC International, 2011c). This also explains the ratio of the 20.000 leadership opportunities provided versus the 60.000 members of the organisation. It is possible to take up a short-term leadership position, combining them during a year or becoming a team member once the project at hand has been finished.

The term of one leadership development program cycle runs for one year at all levels of the organisation – local, national and international. AIESEC has been recognised as one of the most democratic organisation already for 6 consequential years due to this decentralisation of power and hand over of positions to new LDP participants (WorldBlu, 2012). The new participants of the LDP are selected through an election process for all the leadership positions in the organisation. They apply for specific positions, such as the president and vice presidents of the local (or national) committee, as well as project managers and conference organisation committee presidents, depending on the size and structure of the AIESEC chapter. Since the open job titles are limited, the candidates for the LDP have to convince the membership body to vote for them. This means that they have to be certain about the reasons they are willing to take this step in their development as well as assure the value they will bring to the organisation by being an effective leader. Once the new leadership team is elected, they receive transition trainings relevant for their positions and take over the operations within the chapter from the previous team when the new LDP term starts.

From this point on, throughout the empirical material presented in this chapter, we will present the accounts of the AIESEC LDP participant experiences at a local committee level. We focus on these experiences instead of the ones at the national or international level because these, especially in the local committee president position, were reported as the most important ones in the ‘AIESEC career’ of most participants. Moreover, this type of experiences is the most typical for AIESEC LDP, as most of the members typically go for the positions beyond the local level and finish their participation in the LDP after one term in the leadership body of AIESEC. Additionally, the operations at a local – city or

university – level, where the work is mostly with the local students and enterprises, are more similar across Europe than those at the national level, where the ‘organisational reality’ differs tremendously among the countries, depending on factors like the size and wealth of the country.

Accounts of the Activities within the AIESEC Leader Development Program

The experiential leader development program is based on managing a team of usually 3 to 6 people and being responsible for the daily operations and results delivered by this unit. The team operations vary from exchange project management, sales of the internships, financial management, talent management, marketing and communications, event organising, intern reception and others, according to the structure of the particular AIESEC local committee. The team leader is often starting their term by recruiting and training the team to provide the necessary skills for on-the-job performance. Throughout the term, the team leader is responsible for managing the team in all aspects – education, motivation, tracking of the performance results and making changes to the team, if necessary. As one of the interviewees put it: “keeping all the threads in your hand and making sure that everything works out well in the end.”

Becoming a leader and switching the mindset from being an executive and following instructions to managerial thinking is not an easy step at first:

“When you are at work, you are usually used to take orders from people, you’re not the one giving them. So it is different when it’s changed around.”

Most of the respondents said it was difficult to trust their own team to do things instead of working on their own. However, this is also recognised as the first step in actual leadership experience and crucial for the development of the team members:

“It is the first stage of leadership as I think. You don't understand and you don't trust your people and then you are doing everything by yourself. And when you're leading your team a little bit longer, then you understand that actually delegating is one of the things that you can do with your team because this is actually the thing that gives them the experience and is developing them.”

Usually, the team leaders adapt to their role within a few months; however, sometimes it takes much longer time or does not happen at all. One of the LDP participants admits that he lacked trust in his team and thus his team members did not receive as good development experience as expected:

“Because I am bit more of a perfectionist, I like things to be done well, so possibly a bit of a difficulty in that. And that might have made my time less successful, maybe members weren’t as engaged”.

Another challenge, for the team leaders was “to know how to inspire people to do stuff without saying” – to run the operations without constant follow-up and tracking. The ability of the team members to work independently depends on appropriate education and training, but most importantly on the motivation to achieve the results that are expected. In a non-profit setting there are no financial rewards, so the understanding why one is of paramount importance:

“A person has to understand why he or she needs to do something, because if there is no reason for doing something, whatever action it is, then simply he or she is not motivated to do anything. I have seen that quite a lot – if people don’t understand the reasons why they’re doing, they are just falling back with the things.”

Usually the ‘why’ for the members of AIESEC is self-development, they are members of the organisation and invest their time and effort into running the operations because they want to learn new skills and gain experience. As one of the LDP participants noted, “people have to feel the development or they have to know that they can develop in the tasks they are doing. People are quite selfish when considering their nature”. Therefore, the leader of the team has to place a lot of effort into ensuring that their team members are constantly learning and growing within the organisation. This also helps fostering new talents and participants for the LDP next year, if the members decide they want to gain more skills and experience than they have obtained while being a team member. Another factor for the member motivation is good working environment through positive attitude, recognition of successes, close interpersonal relationships and engaging the

members in the AIESEC organisational culture and aligning the personal and organisational goals through a shared vision for the team and the whole local chapter:

“Being a leader, you should be making the environment, keeping up the team spirit and the culture as you cannot motivate the people that strictly.”

“For me it was very important to have a vision and follow the vision and to make people believe and work for this common vision.”

The yearlong term at a leadership position of the organisation is the backbone of the AIESEC leader development program and provides on-the job learning for the participants. These experiences accumulate throughout the year, and by the end of the term, the LDP participants acknowledge that the daily tasks and managing the team throughout the year have contributed to their development:

“You are working with different people, you are working with different situations, sometimes it is difficult, and sometimes easy. You have to manage everything to achieve the result. And you learn a lot. By planning, by doing, by doing everyday action steps.”

The AIESEC LDP experience adds to the development and learning of the students by creating an environment where they can apply the theoretical knowledge obtained during their studies and practice skills that will be useful in their future careers. The program promotes a ‘can do’ attitude of the participants and “pushes” the participants to be entrepreneurial in running the organisation:

“Experience, that is the most important thing. At the university we just get the theory but we don’t actually have the opportunity to practice it. That is the great thing about AIESEC – we are given an opportunity and it is just about going out and doing it.”

“Having the right support, the right environment that really pushes the people to be really as crazy as an average entrepreneur, that can help them get there or have at least a chance at it.”

The experiential learning is combined with the classroom-type of learning. The LDP participants take part in various training events locally, but the main learning events in AIESEC are conferences. These are usually national or international events, usually 3-4

days long, sometimes up to 10 days. At the conferences AIESEC members receive training and education about the organisation, its values and how they are implemented through practices. This is helpful knowledge to 'bring back; to the team they are leading and helps as an inspiration. Also, the members receive 'functional training to become better at running the organisational operations. These trainings are adjusted for each level of development - the LDP participants often receive adjusted education, which is tailored to educate them about their role as a leader of the organisation. Often, these four days of constant learning is seen as a very intense learning experience, but also perceived as one of the most noticeable developments throughout the LDP, as it is a concentrated learning in a short period of time.

“If you go on international conference you see a bigger picture of the organization and in the way it was all about myself. And I met so many different people and awesome people from all over the world and it just made me feel “okay this organization is really special. And I want to continue with it. I found something out that was pushing me down and I changed his thing and... I was like “oh my God, everything is possible”.

“My best learning experience was the TtT. It was 4 days and it was really intensive. You have to really prepare for it. It was things that you don't get at school or university. Even stuff like how to use a PowerPoint, how to use effectively the colour scheme.”

“At TtT you can really see the personal development, from when you arrive on the first day to when you leave three days later. People have changed and that's really amazing. The other personal developments happen over weeks, months or years, but this is an instant change that you see in people.”

These training events are used as leverage points throughout the year for strengthening the organisational culture because they allow communicating the message of the purpose and mission of the organisation in a very concentrated form. But perhaps even more importantly, the conferences bring together the members of the organisation who are connected to this vision and share similar experiences. By interacting with each other, they reflect on their LDP experiences thus far which in turn accentuates their learning over time and enhancing the experiential development:

“The experience of being a president, vice president or organisation committee president, that is just one side of it. But being in AIESEC and talking about these things that actually matter, and thinking about the future and what we want to do with our lives, I think that’s what really matters. Without our noticing, we learn and grow a lot.”

The learning and development happens throughout the LDP term and comes from the combination of the various experiences – on the job learning and didactic learning. The design of the program does not determine how many and what kind of events to attend, nor is it pre-established what goals the teams have to reach. How much they do in AIESEC is up to the participants of the development program, and in the next part of the chapter we will describe the open-endedness of this LDP in more detail.

Reflections Upon the Open-ended Design of the AIESEC LDP

AIESEC provides freedom to its LDP participants to tailor their learning program according to their personal needs and goals. Even though the leaders of the organisation do have specific job titles and are responsible for running a functional team, there is a lot of emphasis on their personal developmental experience. One of the interviewees sums it up:

“We have this term ‘designing experiences’. So for us it is about the experience the people have and it is not about the job description they get. It is not only about the work, but it is about the feeling they have when they do it.”

There are several key elements to the open-ended design of the leader development program, which together create the basis of the AIESEC platform for leadership development. First of all, the participants of the experiential development program are not required to have the relevant skills, knowledge or experience to take a certain position within the organisation. Often it is more the willingness to participate in the LDP and the motivation for working the year in AIESEC, which is required to be elected in an open position. The participants recall having little understanding about their role within the organisation at the beginning of their term:

“I was not the ‘born leader’, I think, so I did not know a lot of things and I didn’t know what my task was and I definitely didn’t know how to do all these things in the beginning.”

“When I was VPOGX (Vice President of Outgoing Exchange), then I got elected not knowing anything about OGX (Outgoing Exchange). I had, it seems like, zero experience, zero knowledge about what OGX is and how to do it. When I was applying for a VPOGX, I was not really thinking; I was just thinking, “VPOGX, yeah why not, let’s do it. Let’s see what happens”. I did not know what to expect so I had no idea what exactly I’m going to do.”

The fact that the leaders of the organisation gain knowledge over time instead of having it already is not only acknowledged in AIESEC, it is in fact an essential part of the leader development program. The participants are not expected to be fully familiar with their job role at the beginning of their term, but acquire the experience over time. This means that the teams are not always the teams are fully functional and efficient in running the operations because the leader is still learning about their role. However, because there are no predetermined outcomes as a success of the development program, what is recognised as important is the learning process rather than just the delivery of the results. AIESEC is often compared to a playground, and is contrasted to the “real world”. While giving the exposure to the business world to the people working for the organisation and the professional training that is comparable to professional organisations, it is seen more as a developmental experience:

“It was a learning experience. The first half a year I managed to, well me and my team, managed to recruit exactly 1 person. It was a lot about learning, we just tried different things; see what worked, what did not work. Most of the things did not work. But it all gave us more experiences in what might work more. So in AIESEC it is easier, the environment is safe; even if you fail it is not so bad, you move on. In real life it is a bit harder because there are real money, real people, real careers (..) involved.”

The failures at the work are seen as another way to gain leadership experience because admitting the failure and learning from it requires self-reflection and resilience to change

the course of action and adjust the way of working. The participants acknowledge AIESEC as an environment where it is 'ok to fail' and learn from such mistakes:

“That’s probably a big one as well, learning from your failures. Like, okay, you know everyone fails (..), but can you effectively learn from your failures and then move on and then carry on and actually try instead of just giving up. (..) You have to find it in you. It’s not something that everyone has and not something that you will expect one to have. But I think AIESEC gives you this environment of support where you might be more (..) comfortable about it.”

The LDP participants co-create the design of their own learning process by combining the various elements of learning in one complete developmental experience. They are encouraged to look for the self-discovery opportunities as a leader without imposed limitations. The individual is free to choose what matches their professional and personal goals - whether it is acquiring specific new skills, which will be valuable for their professional career or more all-rounded development of the person as a leader:

“It is like a Swedish table. So you can take for yourself everything you want. If you want development, you take development. If you want enjoyment, you take the enjoyment out of this. If you want [knowledge of] marketing, you take marketing. Or if you want [knowledge of] finance, you take finance.”

This open-ended design of the AIESEC LDP requires the participant to take an active part in creating their experiences within the organisation and one has to “have the courage to take the responsibility for your own actions and actually take [the opportunities].” One of the participant sums up the LDP design:

“AIESEC is a bit of a playground and you don’t have that much pressure as if you were in a company where it’s all down to profit because in AIESEC it is all about the impact on people. You have many organisations, which as a cause have environmental protection or sustainable production, or pet protection – you name it. But AIESEC focuses on the people, and that is not so common. The whole experience: you have leadership trainings, you have skills sessions. But AIESEC is a complete thing, it is not just that you get trainings or that you work on something, but it is everything combined which you go through professionally

and emotionally. And you are connected to the people who go through this with you. It is a very informal way of learning, it is not something you could learn in a usual university program.”

However, the open-endedness of the leader development program design also poses its challenges, which may result in less successful individual experiences within the AIESEC LDP because of the necessary pro-active attitude towards creating ones own development experience within AIESEC. This can be difficult to the participants of the program if they do not actively engage in pursuing the learning opportunities because they expect more uniform design of the program and wait for somebody else to direct their development:

“I know there were a lot of people who joined with me who didn’t get that experience. If you don’t take those different opportunities, you don’t go to the conferences, then the experience will not be that good. Because even if we joined at the same time, it does not mean that you get the same experience because it’s so much actually up to you yourself, what kind of opportunities you take and what kind of experiences you have in AIESEC. But if you don’t do it, if you don’t go conferences, if you don’t be pro-active yourself in a way, then your experience might not be that good.”

A way that AIESEC helps the LDP participants through this self-direction process is by providing mentorship through one-to-one talks, regular development reviews and coaching sessions. However, to gain the most out of the development program the motivation of the individuals has to come from within by understanding the reason they are participating in the program and what they wish to gain from it:

“Actually, when talking about motivation, then you cannot motivate a person; a person has to motivate his or her self and the motivation comes from the [in]side. An external person can only influence the other one, but actually the motivation from the very beginning comes from the inside. If the person does not understand the ‘why part’ or does not understand the recognition, then there is no motivation, so you can only give a helpful hand, but you cannot do nothing more.”

Due to the open-ended design of the AIESEC LDP, the learning outcomes vary among the participants. Nevertheless, there are several overarching themes that came up repeatedly during the interviews and that we are describing in the next part of this chapter.

Learning Outcomes of the AIESEC LDP

The experiential development program results in several learning outcomes for each participant. They point out the gained skills and experience as well as gaining belief in oneself and change of the plans for their future. The most specific learning outcome are the skills obtained throughout the on-the-job learning as well as the training events. The skills mentioned by the participants are:

“How to apply for a sponsorship, how to contact a company, how to run an event, and the processes involved in that.”

“How to make plans, how to make a budget, how to promote.”

“How to set the goals and how to achieve the results, how to organise projects and events.”

“Approaching other people; advocating [an] opinion in negotiating, for a cause or for a sale.”

“English language skills. Facilitation, planning, lots of HR practical things – interviewing, recruiting and education cycle planning”

“Of course, all those leadership theories talking about planning, tracking, organizing, and so on.”

On the job learning is appreciated for providing experiences and skills, which are valued in the corporate world, like team management, working experience within an international environment, performing under stressful circumstances and taking initiative. As one of the prominent skills gained was interpersonal skills gained through being a leader of a team as well as by leading training sessions and other type of events:

“Standing up and speaking your mind in front of big crowds, this is also easier now, which is really cool because before I was so scared of being in front of people.”

“I can pretty much speak in public in front of a hundred or two hundred people quite easily, I can give training sessions and understand audiences quite well”

Ability to work under pressure and with strict deadlines is another distinguished ability that was developed throughout the leadership term at AIESEC:

“AIESEC taught me how to multitask and how to do different things and how to prioritise and how to work with different deadlines. My AIESEC experience is the reason why I know that I won’t freak out because of that.”

“When you have to manage twenty different tasks in one or two hours.”

Another important outcome of the term as a team leader the participants mention the building of confidence and resilience, which is especially appreciated in the current world of start-ups and entrepreneurs. Being a leader requires stepping out of the frame and taking on new responsibilities even when they are not specifically assigned:

“I learnt a lot in resilience, I learnt a lot in, you know, how to stand up for yourself and really, (..) take responsibility for something and commitment. I don’t need to be told something to do anymore! (..) If something goes wrong and I feel somewhat connected to it, I’ll take ownership of it and go for it 100%. I am not just going to let things go just because it is not my role, not my position or that kind of thing.”

The experiences within the AIESEC leader development program and the obtained skills are a valuable asset, which is recognised by the employers and can help the LDP participants advance in their careers:

“When you are going to a job interview actually outside of AIESEC, (..) the image that you create with the fact that you have been a leader, you are better than the ones who haven’t [the] experiences of being a leader.”

“I basically got the job because of AIESEC, because I went to the interview and they said, “you will have to manage 500 emails a day and you will have to be multi-tasking every day and you will have a team (..) to work with”. And I said, “no big deal, I’ve done it in AIESEC”. So they were really impressed that I was the local committee president at AIESEC.”

Besides the skills, another outcome of the participation in the LDP is creation of an international network of AIESEC members who have gone through a similar LDP experiences and are striving for future leadership opportunities. Such network will gain value over time as the people advance in their careers and can be very helpful in getting ahead to pursue the goals of a person:

“If I really decide to do something that I would need help from a different field or from a person with a different expertise, I know that in AIESEC I have at least one friend who would be able to help me.”

In addition to the outcomes of the LDP described above, the most outstanding one was the transformation of self-understanding. The participants report having their self-image completely changed through the experiential development; they had learned about their capabilities as a leader. In the course of the experiences of overcoming the self-imposed limitations and achieving goals together with their teams, the leaders of AIESEC have discovered their potential, which they are willing to explore even further:

“I never thought that I could make a difference in other people lives, but I am seeing it now. And just saying it out loud, it is something that I would have never done a year ago.”

“It is something that you discover and develop. Some people discover it; some people know already how they are a leader. I would say there is a leader, a responsible person in every person. Everyone can have impact on others. It is just that you change someone’s day, maybe week, maybe life – who knows. It is an attitude thing.”

“I think that depending on my AIESEC experience, if that is going to carry on now or not, that will still help me to find how I can somehow really take some action steps. And make things that I might have thought weren’t possible beforehand, actually completely possible or attainable. Or at least I can try! And I don’t care about failing anymore! Because I have failed and that’s fine and you learn from your failures.”

The realisation that one can achieve more than they initially thought and that they can create change within their own and others’ lives carries over to the expectations about the future careers:

“AIESEC made me realize that there are so much more to life and so much more that I could do personally. And that just being a chef is not something that would satisfy me anymore. This realisation came after maybe half a year, quarter of a year, something like that. The main thing I discovered there is so much more to life than having a 9 to 5 job (..) That whatever you want to do, you can do.”

“I really appreciate my job and what I do now but I also feel that I want to do something else. I want to do more than that. (..) I want something bigger than right now. (..) That I could die in peace thinking that I have done something with my life, that I don't go to work to earn money and go back home or go shopping to spend the money that I've gained, but to do something for the people, something that makes a difference.”

The AIESEC leader development program sets out “to give an entrepreneurial and responsible attitude towards being a better leader.” (AIESEC International, 2011c). The themes of responsible leadership and being one's own boss in the future were present during most of the interviews. The LDP participants were emphasising their willingness to step up and become a noticeable voice within the society to influence the current issues and work towards helping the society:

“Finding a problem within the society and the helping in sorting it out. And being the mediator, the person in between the local society and the government, the decision making people. And hopefully in the future I would like to be one of the decision making people”

“I think it has taught me a lot into how you can really affect people and have an impact on people quite easily if you really put your heart to it! I think I want to really have yeah, but more so should society focused impact and work on something which really does give back to society.”

The LDP participants wish to become the “voice for the voiceless” and influence the processes within their countries in various ways:

“I would like to be able to go and talk to schools around [the country] being a motivational speaker. Hopefully I will gain enough experience throughout my lifetime to be able to do that, to share my experiences to the students and motivate them.”

“I can very well imagine that I end up politics because I don’t agree with how the system is run currently. I feel responsible for changing something in there and put myself out there to be a better politician than the ones we have currently.”

Most of the AIESEC LDP participants saw themselves becoming “their own boss” in the future by becoming an entrepreneur or opening a new non-profit organisation or a school. This was seen as a continuation of their career after several years to gain experience in the field and to acquire the starting capital.

“I will definitely do something that is connected to the so-called freedom. I would like to be boss of my own and for doing that I need some kind of resources in order to get in.”

“One thing that I have on my mind for the past months is to start my own NGO. This is one of my aims because I really like volunteer work. I’m this kind of volunteer work junkie, I think.”

“Probably in the longer term, I would like to have my own company and kind of be my own boss but what exactly would that company do, that I can’t tell you right now because I don’t know it even myself. For AIESECers I guess, most of them are more or less capable of actually also running their own businesses, working on their own, being their own boss, making their own companies since they all have the experiences more or less, they all have the contacts, they all have the ideas. And it’s just a matter of just starting doing it.”

One may wonder, how many of these intentions are realised in real life? While there are many AIESEC alumni who reached high peaks in their careers, it is still seen as a challenge to keep striving to become a true change agent. Like with any leader development programme, once it is finished, the learning outcomes from it start to “wear out” if not applied in practice. As described before, the alumni of this development program see themselves striving to be responsible leaders of future and wish to help the society either by being a responsible leader at a company or NGO or by starting their own business. However, these intentions might be forsaken due to various circumstances and the vision of becoming a “true leader” is delayed for some time.

“We have all these great cause in AIESEC but in the end when you see what an average AIESEC alumni does, I mean, is he really going and doing for peace and for the fulfilment

of humankind potential and all that...it's quite debatable to be honest. Are we really doing all that we could? To achieve those goals...I don't know...I don't think so right now..."

The accounts of experiences within the AIESEC LDP and the learning outcomes presented in this chapter tell a story of the development of young people and forming of self-awareness as future leaders. We discuss how these learning outcomes compare to those of more traditional leader development programs and consider the relative advantages and challenges of implementing similar LDPs.

Chapter 5: Analysis & Discussion

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things'.

Peter F. Drucker

Our first research question explores leader development program experiences by asking *What is the participant perspective regarding the learning outcomes of a leader development program?* Additionally, the study addresses the sub-questions which derived from linking the theory and the empirical material. These questions facilitate the findings and drive the analysis and discussion. *How are the learning outcomes compared to the ones gained from the classroom based leader development programs?* and *How are the learning outcomes compared to the ones gained from the experiential learning leader development programs?*

Following, we are going to present the main critique towards the dominant designs of leader development programs as well as benefits. After that, we present the benefits of these programs.

Exploration of the Findings

Design

The conventional view on the leader development programs as solely providing competences has been criticised by numerous scholars. Both classroom-based and experiential learning based LDPs pivot around the idea that a leader needs to develop certain skills to become more effective. The notion that the LDPs are contributing to achieve competencies specified for becoming 'successful' leaders portrays the outcomes of leader development as tangible (Townley, 2002). Gaining knowledge around, for instance, budgeting, operations, and project management does fulfil the criterion of a theoretical knowledge base which enhances the LDP participants to build on (Carroll et al., 2008). Nevertheless, practicing leadership has been rarely linked and interpreted as pertinent to solely those elements (Carroll et al., 2008). Hence, the view of competencies

as the fundamental attribute of leader development is problematic and the emphasis in its implementation in LDPs inadequate (Carroll et al., 2008).

According to Bolden and Gosling (2006, p.147) the exclusive emphasis of LDPs in building participants merely competencies resembles to a 'repeating, recurring refrain' of a tune in music which insists on a predefined structure and fosters predictability and restrains the development of "the melody or voice" of the participants (Carroll et al., 2008, p.365). Competencies cannot replace people's passion, creativity and uniqueness (Carroll et al., 2008) as meters are not music if not put together. Therefore, LDPs which are designed to provide leadership proficiency, overestimate the potential of this approach. Bolden and Gosling (2006, p.158) suggest that skills do not constitute 'a sufficiently rich vocabulary' for developing the delicate qualifications and the complex and highly contingent mentality required for practicing leadership (Carroll et al., 2008). Rather it is proposed that an unconventional framework rather than a standard and predefined model which would promote diversity would offer richer insights to LDP participants (Bolden & Gosling, 2006).

Another important limitation of competence based LDP frameworks is the fact that even though it is assumed that due to their predetermined nature to be easier to measure and evaluate, in fact the measurement and evaluation can be questioned as it relies on a set of completed components of the program and the participants assertions (Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011). The uncertainty rests on the fact that the participants can not necessarily assess and ensure if the provided input from LDPs has an explicit standard outcome (Foster et al., 2008). In other words, the variable of ambiguity that is suggested to be surpassed in the cases of competency based frameworks is not absent (Barker, 1997; Probert & Turnbull, 2011).

Benefits

Classroom based LDPs can be universally applicable, due to their independent nature (Lyne & Kennedy, 2011). This attribute makes them easy for most participants to understand (Carroll et al., 2008) and therefore feel more comfortable to experience (Carroll et al., 2008). Additionally, through the activities offered the individuals acquire

professional expertise (Foster et al., 2008). In particular, the participants learn methods which will enable them to meet the organisation's strategic goals (Collins & Holton, 2004). Moreover, participants most of whom are executives may the program away from distractions therefore the learning outcomes are enhanced (Collins & Holton, 2004). Didactic LDPs also facilitate leader development operating as a community of practice where participants get motivated (Cornforth et al., 2007).

Experiential learning participants have been acknowledging practical experiences as significantly influential (Foster et al., 2008; Foster et al., 2008). More specifically, reporting on their development they assert on their later performance being substantial improved (Laljami, 2009; Larsen, 2004; Thomas & Cheese, 2005). In addition, it is underlined that a wide ray of leaders; entrepreneurs; executives, social activists as well as politicians proposed to developed more from 'real world' experiences than didactic type LDPs (Thomas & Cheese, 2005). As it is stressed, the classroom based LDPs have helped gaining technical skills, while the experiential LDPs have contributed towards the ultimate understanding about the leader roles (Thomas & Cheese, 2005).

Following, the experiential learning based LDPs are suggested to promote resilience, as the participants have the opportunity to practice the competences gained facing challenging situations, their fears and uncertainties as well as handling failure (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). In this environment then, the participants increase their self-confidence; develop self-awareness and reflective consciousness (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Larsen, 2004). The importance of the learning outcomes lies in the flexibility and effective management of stressful situations as well as crises management (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Foster et al., 2008; Orr, 2007). These capabilities that leaders achieve over experience results in optimism and confidence built over the participation is exercised based on successful accomplishment of tasks (Kayes & Kayes, 2011). Moreover, the participants gain emotional intelligence reflecting on their practices and processes therefore increase their performance by incorporating these learning points (Kayes & Kayes, 2011; Foster et al., 2008; Orr, 2007).

The accounts of the experiences within leadership program which has explored throughout the empirical analysis show that all of the aforementioned development outcomes have been attained by the holistic approach of the AIESEC LDP. This leads us to a finding that the combination of the two conventional LDP designs provide enriched and well-rounded leader development experiences and thus better learning outcomes than the isolated LDPs.

Limitations

The universal applicability of the classroom based LDPs presents a difficulty in adapting to the context which renders the individuals isolated from others and settings (Carroll et al., 2008). Thus, although the programs propose offering up-to-date knowledge regarding handling a range of challenging circumstances, in fact the input offered refers to handling predefined circumstances through tested models of behaviours and tasks (Carroll et al., 2008). Additionally, didactic LDPs are short-term and therefore, this pattern has been questioned about providing sustainable outcomes (Leskiw & Singh, 2007) Nonetheless, since didactic LDPs rely on predetermined models and proven methods, there is a question if 'new' knowledge is provided (Carroll et al., 2008).

These challenges stemming from the classroom-based LDP design, are countered by the holistic approach of integrating this design within the experiential learning based LDP. The empirical evidence suggests that the didactic approach complements the experiential learning approach but provides leverage points for reflection for experiential development and the skills that may be applied on-the-job learning.

The success of the leader development programs based on either didactic input or experiential learning is usually tied to pre-determined outcomes, such as return on investment or acquisition of specific skill sets. The engagement within these LDPs is supposed to be happening in a predefined manner according to the organisational goals, making the design of the programs very rigid and not adaptable to the actual program participants. These programs miss the alignment between the personal and organisational aspirations. The open-ended design of the integrated LDP design that we are suggesting, acknowledges the success of outcomes on a much wider scale. The main aim of this type

of program is to help the individual achieve their personal development goals and make them realise their potential for leadership. The success of the LDP is not directly tied to the operational outcomes, providing much more freedom for the participants to try out new things and develop independent thinking and sense of responsibility.

Because the success of the traditional LDPs is so much tied to the immediate performance of the individuals who took part in them, their focus is overly short-term, and they lose the outlook for developing the leaders in a longer time frame (Foster et al., 2008). The organisations are more interested in what they can gain out of the improved skills of the LDP participant, and do not centre their attention to developing a leader who could leave the company in a few years' time to pursue further career. Within the open-ended LDP which we explore in our study, the focus is on developing the leaders in a longer-term perspective, regardless of their current contribution to the organisation.

In the development programs with pre-defined design and learning outcomes, the learning opportunities that have not been planned pass by unrecognised (Laljani, 2009). Even when accidental learning has taken place, because the lack of acknowledgement of the resultant learning outcomes, the programs miss out on adding more facets to the development of the participants (Boud & Middleton, 2003). Whereas the open-ended design facilitates the recognition of the accidental learnings by integrating points for reflection throughout the program. Unplanned events, such as taking on new responsibilities that are not in the original job description or talking to a newly met person have been reported by the study participants as adding to their LDP experiences and triggering deeper reflection and self-awareness of the developing leaders.

As described above, the open-ended experiential leader development program is able to combine the benefits of the didactic input and experiential learning based development programs and mitigates some of their limitations. However, there are several challenges of the more traditional LDPs that this program cannot counter. Similarly to other experiential learning based LDPs, it is difficult to measure the return on investment of the open-ended LDP (Van Velsor et al., 2010). Also, like all development programs, there

exist doubts about the application of the learning outcomes in real life after the program has been finished (Leskiw & Singh, 2007).

Also, we must acknowledge several limitations specific to its design. The open-ended design of the LDP explored in this study demands a high level of engagement from the participants in co-creating their learning and development experiences (Hughes, 2010). This can prove to be a challenge to the LDP participants of the program without a clear purpose and personal goals for what they wish to gain from the development program. Yet, providing guidance throughout the LDP can help the participants to clarify their vision of the participation in this program.

Another challenge is posed by the open-ended leadership program's focus on the participant experiences rather than on their performance during the program. While doable in a non-profit sector, it is possible that the businesses will not see it as a viable option because they have to concentrate on gaining profit and development of the people is a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. However, these companies could miss out on the long-term focus for creating the next generation of leaders who are willing and capable of making responsible and beneficial commercial decisions in the future. Therefore, we suggest keeping a balance between the focus on performance and the development of the individuals by not punishing the mistakes that are made during the learning process.

Throughout the body of literature the development of leaders has been distinguished from the development of managers (Day, 2001; Probert & Turnbull, 2011; Rost, 1993). Management development refers to acquiring expertise in specific knowledge areas which connect to effectively carrying out the managerial roles (Austin et al., 2011; Collins & Holton, 2004; Pernick, 2001). On the other hand, leaders' development is proposed to be a process which enables LDP participants to grow by discovering meaningful ways to approach the challenges on their own in an organisational setting (Keys & Wolfe, 1988). Therefore, the differentiation rests on the fact that managers' development is considered to be about operating under standard role specifications (Keys & Wolfe, 1988) while developing of leaders refers to building the capability of people to

discover their own solution to unforeseen circumstances (Dixon, 1993) and be able to develop out-of the box ways of approaching their undertakings (Keys & Wolfe, 1988). Following our analysis, effective implementation of leader development means helping LDP participants to learn from their own endeavours through an open ended framework, rather than providing prescribed learning outcomes. This provides unlimited potential for self-discovery processes for the developing leaders.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, reflecting on the findings presented we revisit our research purpose. The purpose of this paper was to address both the benefits and limitations of two prevailing approaches concerning the implementation of leader development programmes and explore an integrative pattern of a leader development program at a youth non-profit through the lens of the participants' experiences. The prevailing approaches were on one hand the didactic input oriented leader development programs and on the other hand the experiential learning leader development programs. Both views advocated for leader development effectiveness and both have been previously researched in terms of their return on investment and other performance indicators.

The paper adopted an interpretative view and was underpinned by leader development programs related literature. Based on empirical research integration of both the classroom based and the experiential learning oriented approach was suggested in terms of the design and other implementation attributes of leader development programmes. The explorative study proposed that a holistic integrative approach offers new insights in the implementation of leader development initiatives.

The paper was based on the consideration of leader development programs relevant literature and qualitative data. The data were primarily gathered from sixteen semi-structured open-ended interviews with the participants of a youth non-profit leader development program. Additionally, documentation, which illuminated the organization's vision; mission; values; and advocated achievements, was reviewed. The methodology used was semi-structured interviews in order to gain a better understanding of the participants insights shaped by their experiences and expressed through their stories, as these illustrate how the participants make sense of their experiences within the LDPs. The analysis is guided from a hermeneutic methodology and was established from an interpretative and constructive disposition.

Current leader development programs logic was designed to provide either classroom based learning outcomes or learning output through experiences. These perspectives have

been criticised to demonstrate weaknesses which have an impact on the LDPs effectiveness. Designers of leader development programmes have been inclined to overestimate the extent to which programme participants develop profound leader capabilities in classroom based developmental programmes or in ones relying only in experiential learning development. Our findings showed that the personal experiences combined with professional proficiency may add value to the development of the leaders. An interpretative approach can provide theoretical foundation for the argument that leader development programmes may adopt a more holistic perspective for learning outcomes to be enhanced and long-term.

The paper's findings are that the learning outcomes in an integrative pattern leader development program are richer for the participants than the ones gained in referenced segregated frameworks. This is because the combination of the two conventional leader development program designs into an integrated LDP provided the combined benefits of the two separate designs, while partially mitigated the limitations of both referenced LDP conventional types. The study argued that it is time to combine rather than choose between offering leader development programmes which emphasise either on professional output or on learning through experiences. Additionally, this research encouraged scholars and practitioners of leader development programmes to consider an integrative LDP implementation attempt of providing both classroom based input and the opportunity to learning through experiences. Furthermore, the paper showed that this pattern ensures that the main learning outcome the participant is to develop their self-understanding in addition to enhancing their competences.

The discovery of the leadership development program participants is by no means complete. This explorative study aimed to gain new insights and provide a novel holistic approach to the leader development programs by integrating the experiential and classroom learning. We suggest further exploration into the processes of developing leader self-discovery. Also, we see the need to find out how to ensure the sustainability of the learning outcomes obtained through LDPs. Finally, more research towards practical implementation of the holistic LDP emphasising the participant experiences.

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Appendix

Appendix 1- Interview Questions

- Tell us about your experience of AIESEC leadership development program (?)
- How has being part of this program impacted you?
- Could you describe a situation that illustrates your development as a leader at AIESEC?
- What have been your struggles during the leadership experience?
- How do you apply what you have learned about leadership development in your work?
- Has your view on leadership changed the AIESEC leadership experience? How?

Appendix 2 - Interview Details

Nr.	Method of contact	Country	Date of the interview	Gender	Duration (min)
1	email	UK	11/4/2012	male	~40 (disrupted recording)
2	email	Iceland	13/4/2012	female	30:58
3	email	Estonia	14/4/2012	female	40:49
4	email	Estonia	15/4/2012	female	39:38
5	email	Finland	16/4/2012	male	51:30

6	email	Finland	20/4/2012	male	29:42
7	email	UK	22/4/2012	male	32:20
8	Facebook	Ukraine	23/4/2012	female	25:19
9	Facebook	Estonia	24/4/2012	male	32:21
10	Facebook	Denmark	24/4/2012	female	30:56
11	Facebook	Lithuania	25/4/2012	female	33:07
12	Facebook	Estonia	25/4/2012	female	39:15
13	Facebook	Austria	27/4/2012	female	35:31
14	Facebook	Romania	27/4/2012	male	48:48
15	Facebook	Finland	2/5/2012	female	44:01
16	Facebook	Austria	2/5/2012	male	35:52