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Program: An Exploratory Study

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# **Long-term Effectiveness of a Transitional Leadership Development Program: An Exploratory Study**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Although leadership development programs are in high demand, research into their long-term outcomes has been sparse. The main purpose of this article is to explore how a transformational leadership development program can affect the lives of its participants. We address three fundamental questions: (1) what do transformational leadership programs transform?, (2) how does the change process occur?, and (3) how are behavioral changes maintained over time?

To set the stage for this research, we begin by looking at why executives attend leadership development programs. Subsequently, we present the results of an exploratory longitudinal outcome study of a leadership development program for senior executives. Changes are evaluated both quantitatively through test-retest results of a 360° survey across 12 key leadership dimensions, taken by 11 senior executives in 2005 and again in 2006. We also explore change qualitatively through semi-structured interviews with the executives in our sample.

The results of this exploratory study show that, for one cohort of participants who have completed the program, individual 360° ratings one year post-program in several GELI dimensions have improved. Dimensions that show marked increase in ratings included *rewarding and feedback* and *emotional intelligence*—we posit that this indicates an enhanced level of self-awareness among participants. We identified several positive change factors mentioned consistently by participants in this program: involvement in group coaching; realistic action plans; acting out and experimenting with new behaviors; and follow-up partnerships in a learning community. We look at the best practices that enhance individual development and change, and discuss limitations of this study as well as implications for future research.

**Keywords:** *Transformational leadership development programs; leadership group coaching; 360-degree feedback surveys; executive education outcomes; Global Executive Leadership Inventory*

*Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.*

—Leo Tolstoy

*It is never too late to become what you might have been.*

—George Eliot

## INTRODUCTION

Many companies, business schools and consultancies are launching new strategies, systems and programs to enhance leadership development. New trends are shaping the landscape of leadership development programs, prompting a concurrent and urgent need to evaluate them. Some questions remain, however: Exactly what do these “transformational” programs transform? How do they do it? And how lasting are the changes effected by them?

We believe that a common underlying agenda for participants in leadership development programs is the desire to develop an emerging identity (Korotov, 2005). Transformational leadership development programs are designed to help executives make transitions. Over time leadership skills and knowledge become inextricably integrated with the development of self-concept as a leader (Lord & Hall, 2005). Through a process of reframing their own lives, experiences, and frustrations, executives in this type of program discover new meanings in the daily realities of their work, and they begin to experiment with what they have always assumed to be required skills and values. With this new perspective, executives can reexamine their understanding of who they truly want to be, and what role best fits this emerging identity, which for some leads to the development of a new working identity (Ibarra, 2003). Working identity is defined by what we do, by the company we keep and by the formative events in our lives and the story that links who we have been and who we will become (Ibarra, 2003).

The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to study *if* and *how* transformational leadership development programs really work. We began by looking at why executives are interested in leadership development programs in the first place; to understand outcomes, it is crucial to understand executives’ objectives and expectancies for this type of program. We also look at the best practices that enhance individual development and change.

## **Executive programs: the lie of the land**

Three trends are shaping the new landscape of leadership development programs. The first is the increasing recognition of the need to broaden the concept of leadership (Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Manz & Neck, 1996) to include an awareness of the social processes that engage members in a community (Barker, 1997, Drath & Palus, 1994; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Second, there is a growing acceptance that developmental learning is enhanced by active on-the-job learning as well as more reflective off-the-job programs. The third trend, driven by participants themselves, is the inclusion of methods that encourage a learning process that is embedded in the reality of organizational settings, with participants having an active, collective role in their development processes, both individually and as a group.

In our experience, people join executive education programs to learn and practice skills that could lead to greater effectiveness at work and in their personal life (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). Participants tell us that they view such programs as a “source of new energy,” an “opportunity to experiment with and evaluate plans or fantasies,” or “preparation for a new role.” Experienced leaders may be learning more complex organizational and strategic knowledge which requires extended socialization and influencing skills (Mumford, Marks, Shane Connelly, Zaccaro & Reiter-Palmon, 2000). They appreciate executive education programs as an opportunity for self-renewal, and a chance to take stock of their lives and careers (Long, 2004). Realizing that there is no such thing as leadership in a vacuum, they also seek a greater understanding of their role in a broader sense, including the ability to inspire and motivate their employees, and to create more effective teams.

This type of program is often described as “transformational”. By transformational leadership development programs we mean those that use these methodologies to create a transitional space to identify and enable desired behavioral change (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). The pedagogies used in these programs are in sync with the personal expectations of executives: increased self-awareness, overcoming personal blocks, and acquiring a more sophisticated repertoire of behaviors. They include socially-guided methods—such as 360-degree feedback, coaching, simulations and networking—that by definition require active participation to shape not only what executives do, but also who they are and how they interpret what they do (Wenger, 1998). Participants in transformational development programs are not only encouraged to learn, but they are also helped to assimilate new skills and insights that will affect the way they behave at work (Korotov, 2005). Transformational programs use social practices that create a safe environment as primary methods for “pausing” and allowing individual change and development to ferment and emerge. These programs also encourage individuals to test new identities in their daily life, then to come back and report to the group on their experiences in a context of mutual reflection. Thus a virtuous cycle of action and reflection is created and practiced.

Specifically, to create this pause—the capacity for reflection and experimentation removed from the pressures of daily life—leadership development programs should contain at least some form of executive leadership coaching. Typically coaching is a one-on-one experience, rather than a group process. However, some professionals familiar with both kinds of intervention argue that executive coaching and leadership development programs carried out in a group setting have a more dramatic impact

than one-on-one sessions. Coaching in a group setting offers access to the collective minds, hearts, and experiences of several individuals. There are further advantages of the group setting in which trust has been well established: a supportive, collective approach facilitates constructive conflict resolution, stronger commitment to personal and professional development, and greater accountability.

### **The paucity of outcome studies on leadership development programs**

Although the demand for transformational programs is increasing, and direct, post-program, participant-satisfaction ratings are usually quite high, little is known empirically about what remains of the positive affective outcome of programs once participants have plunged back into everyday routine. Subjective client evaluation is not an empirically valid measure of actual effectiveness, for example, for the post-program evaluation of executive coaches (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Rigorous and effective evaluation of the impact of executive education programs requires more than the participants' satisfaction rating on the last day of the program, especially as research seems to show that there is no significant relationship between immediate participant satisfaction and other learning outcomes (Dixon, 1990). In our own practice, we often hear participants talking about the profound effect of the transformational program they are in, but we wanted to evaluate the impact over the long term. This is easier said than done. We found that although there is agreement on the need for comprehensive assessment of long-term outcome of leadership development programs, this has rarely been carried out (Conger & Xin, 2000).

The paucity of outcome studies of executive education programs is largely due to inherent difficulties in undertaking any robust longitudinal study that follows conventional validity criteria (Yorks, Beechler & Ciporen, 2007). The main difficulties of long-term follow-up are the lack of access to reliable performance data from business units; participants' job/function change after a transformational leadership program (assessment of different competencies); and confidentiality issues. In addition, it is almost impossible to identify all the variables affecting (causing or moderating) individual development, and to establish a control group that correctly reflects a group with no formal or informal interventions.

Thus, current research on the outcome of executive coaching is still in its infancy and frequently seems to reflect the view of executive coaches rather than the observations of the individuals who are being coached (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). It appears that coaching interventions do contribute to increased individual productivity, greater effectiveness in interpersonal relations, increased effectiveness in running teams, and a greater capacity of the client to consider alternative perspectives—outcomes that make a positive contribution to organizational functioning (Peterson et al., 2003). Unfortunately, exciting as these observations may be, the evidence is often anecdotal. These observations have not really been systemized into a robust body of research findings (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Kilburg, 1996, 2000).

## METHOD

Faced with these challenges and constraints as we thought about the design of our own research, we decided to conduct a longitudinal pilot study involving participants in an executive program specifically designed to be transformational. INDEAD's *Challenge of Leadership* (COL) program was created and is taught by the first author. It is characterized by intensive use of group coaching and 360-degree developmental feedback instruments. Multisource feedback questionnaires are commonly used in this type of program and are considered one of the most effective tools in the process of leadership development (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Walker & Smither, 1999). It is considered that 360 degree ratings can be in general compared across groups although the background of different cultures and languages might cause some issues (Craig & Hannum, 2006). In a test-retest longitudinal design that took place over one year, we used quantitative data (from a 360-degree survey instrument) and qualitative data (from semi-structured interviews) to explore three themes: What does the COL program transform? How does the change process occur? How is change maintained over the long term? We focused our attention on the assessment of outcomes at the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral levels.

### A CEO developmental seminar

The COL program uses a clinical (psychodynamic) group coaching approach (for a more detailed description of the clinical psychodynamic approach of group leadership coaching, see Kets de Vries, 2005a, 2006 and Kets de Vries, Korotov & Florent-Treacy, 2007). We chose this program for our study despite predictable difficulties in research design—including a relatively small number of participants in the program (20), and their limited time for retesting and interviews—because the group consists of top executives, diverse in national background but fairly homogeneous in terms of hierarchy (CEO, and board-level executives), life cycle, and life experiences. This group also has a greater level of controllability and consistency in the delivery of coaching interventions due to the fact that only two faculty members are involved. Both have a background in business as well as in psychodynamic psychotherapy (both are certified psychoanalysts). They have been coaching senior executives for over 20 years, and have led the COL program together for 16 years.

COL participants, with an average age of about 45, are at the peak of their careers and powerful figures in their organizations. And yet, over the course of the program, they admit to facing deep and sometimes painful dilemmas: *Where do I go from here in my career? How do I reconnect with my spouse and family? What do I want to do with the rest of my life?* Many are dealing with disappointment and disillusionment. They feel alone at the top. To begin to address these anxieties and existential questions, the faculty-coaches quickly establish a relatively risk-free transitional space of trust and mutual respect (for example, by setting rules of confidentiality, and choosing a quiet, comfortable physical environment which remains the same for each module) to facilitate participants' experimentation in this "identity laboratory" (Korotov, 2005). Transitional spaces constitute safe environments where executives have the opportunity to reinvent themselves by helping them to pick up the threads of stagnated development (Winnicott, 1951; Korotov, 2005). Group coaching—in which

participants share a journey of self-exploration—is the principal method of the faculty-coaches’ interventions. Central to this are life narratives (stories told to the group by each participant about personal and professional issues), and vicarious learning (listening and reflecting on the narratives of others). In addition, the faculty-coaches try to engage the participants in a journey of self-discovery and in working together to solve more imminent problems.

Feedback is an essential part of the process, and 360-degree questionnaires are used to help participants reflect on their personality traits, leadership behaviors, and the way they interact with others in work groups and teams (e.g. Kets de Vries, Vrignaud, & Florent-Treacy, 2004; Kets de Vries et al., 2006). At the end of the first module, participants receive structured feedback from observers of their work and private life, from other participants and from faculty-coaches. They compare all this feedback to their self perceptions, and write their own specific action plan for personal and leadership development. In subsequent modules, progress is discussed and the action plans are refined. A heightened sense of self-awareness, coupled with accountability to the group, helps to foster the development of reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) both in a professional and private context. COL participants encourage one another to act and *reflect*, not just fall into the action trap. (It is worth mentioning that although most of the interventions are done in a group setting, the program also includes elements of individual leadership development.) There is a structured follow-up agenda among faculty and participants between modules or at the official end of the program. Participants and faculty exchange regular e-mails to assess participants’ state of mind and progress in their action plans. In addition, each executive is teamed with a fellow participant/learning partner, who also regularly asks for updates on the executive’s commitments and action plan.

### **The 2006 COL study**

All 20 senior executives who had participated in the COL program in 2005 were contacted 12 months after it ended. Out of this group, 14 responded and agreed to participate in the follow-up study, motivated by the fact that we would share the second set of test results with them. Due to the considerable commitment required, only 11 eventually participated. The participants and their observers completed the *Global Executive Leadership Inventory* (GELI) 360-degree survey instrument for a second time, one year after the 2005 program had ended (see Kets de Vries, Vrignaud, & Florent-Treacy, 2004). This test was administered both times in English through the same internet-based platform.

### ***Sample***

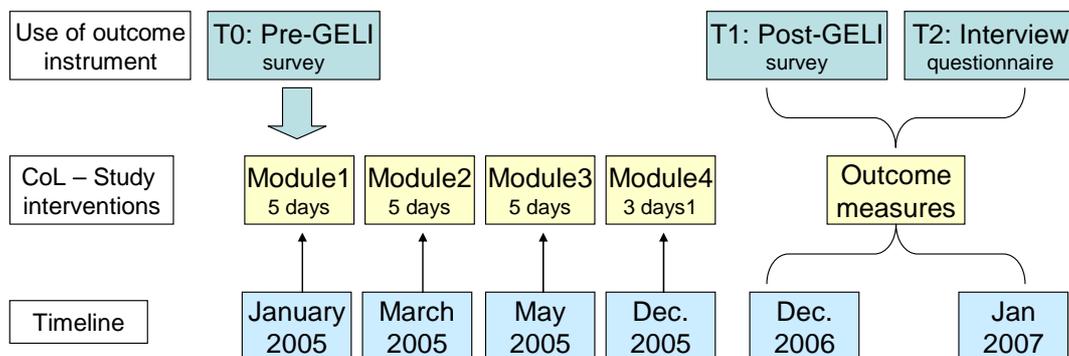
All of the 11 participants were male (in the 2005 COL program there were only two women among the 20 participants). Their age ranged between 37 and 52 with a mean of 44.6 years (SD=5.7years). Nine of the participating executives had a general management background, one came from sales and marketing, and one was head of a practice area in a large global consulting firm. None of the executives came from the same industry. Eight of the participants were in charge of one or more country divisions, or had the position of group functional head. Three of the executives were

main board directors of their respective companies. There were nine Europeans, one American, and one Asian participant.

The number of observers per executive who completed the GELI questionnaire was on average smaller for the second iteration of the test than for the first (2005: 9.6 compared to 2006: 6.4). Although we encouraged the participants to select the same set of observers, in some cases this was not possible because the participant had changed job, position, company or country. We allowed them to choose different observers, despite the risk of a certain bias through rater instability (Seifert, Yukl & McDonald, 2003). We felt that it was critically important that the observers were current organizational members in close contact with the executive in question, thereby ensuring that the evaluation remained relevant (Hammun, Martineau, & Reinelt, 2007).

Before seeing any results from the second test, each of the 11 executives participated in individual, semi-structured telephone interviews. Figure 1 shows the study design, and explains the timeline of the different program modules and the execution of the quantitative and qualitative outcome measurements.

**Figure 1: Study design**



***A quantitative measure of change: using the GELI***

Outcome studies make use of multi-source feedback to quantify changes in coaching and leadership development programs in a pre/post comparison (Toegel & Nicholson,

2005). The *Global Executive Leadership Inventory* (GELI) is a widely used, validated and reliable 360-degree survey instrument developed by the INSEAD Global Leadership Centre. The questionnaire includes 100 items that in aggregate measure 12 dimensions of leadership: *Visioning – Empowering – Energizing – Designing and aligning – Rewarding and feedback – Team-building – Outside orientation – Global mindset – Tenacity – Emotional intelligence – Life balance – Resilience to stress* (see Table 1 for descriptions of the dimensions).

Test-takers and observers are asked to indicate (on a seven-point Likert-type scale) the degree to which each item describes the way they act in a particular situation. As a guideline, they are advised that a score of 1 means that the statement does not describe them at all; in other words, they *never* act in the way described. A score of 7 means that they *always* act in the way described, in other words, they are exemplary in this area. (A full description of the GELI and its development can be found in Kets de Vries, 2005a, 2005b.) Unweighted summated scales were calculated for each dimension using the corresponding items. In the results graphs given to each test-taker, individual scores appear as percentile rankings, obtained from a database of nearly 30,000 mid- and senior-level executives who have completed the instrument in the past.

**Table 1. Description of the 12 GELI dimensions**

Dimension	Description
	<i>The dimension implies a leader who...</i>
Visioning	Seizes opportunities and challenges the status quo, sees the big picture and simplifies complex situations
Empowering	Keeps people informed and minimizes secrets, delegates tasks, creates a sense of ownership and tolerates mistakes.
Energizing	Mobilizes people by selling ideas, leads by example.
Designing and Aligning	Sets performance milestones, holds people accountable, and builds alignment among values, attitudes and behaviors on the one hand and systems on the other.
Rewarding and Feedback	Ensures the fairness of all incentives, sanctions and rewards, gives effective, constructive feedback in an ongoing manner and engages in mentoring.
Team Building	Encourages constructive conflict, creates a cooperative atmosphere, is a good corporate citizen, and, sees diversity of team member as an advantage.
Outside orientation	Manages customer relations and manages outside constituencies
Global Mindset	Has a strong global awareness and exhibits a curiosity about other cultures
Tenacity	Takes a stand for personal beliefs and is resilient.
Emotional intelligence	Engages in an ongoing process of self-reflection, handles emotions well, learns from mistakes, inspires trust, and is able to help people open up.

Life Balance	Thinks about life balance, diversifies life interests and has confidants
Resilience to Stress	Monitors work-related, career, life and health stress.

***A qualitative measure of change: the individual follow-up interviews***

One independent researcher carried out individual semi-structured interviews to test the qualitative outcome of the program (see interview questions, Table 2, below). Neither he nor the participants he interviewed had seen the second set of GELI test results and the interviewer had not interacted with them during or after the program.

The 11 participating executives were briefed beforehand about the purpose of the study and informed about the interview. However, they were not familiar with the specific questions. Each conversation was conducted in English over the phone by the same researcher, tape-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes.

The interview questions were designed to discover not only whether the participants felt that they had benefited from COL, but also to explore specificities of perceived cognitive and emotional change. We were interested in the catalysts for change, and whether or not change had been maintained over the year. We sought specific examples that would illustrate the development process that participants had experienced.

**Table 2: Questions for the semi-structured telephone-interview**

<b>The follow-up interview – questions</b>
<b><i>What changes have occurred?</i></b>
<i>What has happened since the end of the program (introduction)?</i>
<i>What was main take-away for you from the “Challenge of Leadership” program?</i>
<i>After your participation in the program, did you become more effective in your professional life? (Please give examples)</i>
<i>In which specific areas of your life have you most benefited from the program?</i>
<b><i>How did change occur?</i></b>
<i>What specific focus did you have after finishing the program (action plan)?</i>
<i>Were you successful in implementing your action plan?</i>
<i>What were the reasons for your success?</i>
<i>What kind of resistances did you encounter in trying to achieve your goals?</i>
<i>How effective was the Challenge of Leadership Program in (a) identifying your key areas of concern and (b) enabling you to make the desired changes?</i>

## RESULTS

### Quantitative results: comparing the 2005 and 2006 GELI scores

Table 3, below, shows the average raw scores and the standard deviation of the self-evaluation and observer evaluation during (2005) and after (2006) the COL program. The unweighted summated scales of the corresponding items per dimension were calculated for all the test-takers (self and observers). We added the unweighted summated scales of all participants for each dimension and calculated the self average raw scores by dividing them by the number of participants. Each participant has an average observer score obtained by dividing the observers' unweighted summated scales by the number of the observers who assessed him. Finally, the observers' average raw score was calculated by dividing each participant's observers' score by the number of participants. (The dimension *resilience to stress* is assessed through reversed scoring, which means that higher raw scores refer to lower resilience to stress.)

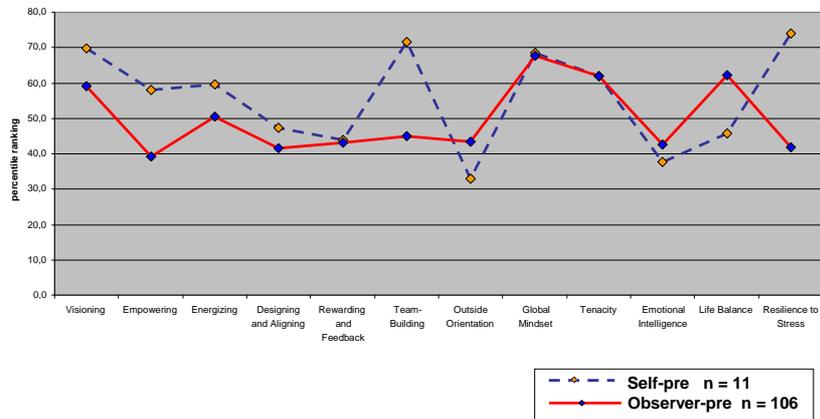
In absolute terms the numeric changes are positive for all dimensions (except for *resilience to stress*, which is negative). To interpret these results in a comprehensive way, we use percentile scores. Percentile scores are often used in psychological test manuals and in literature on commercially published standardized tests in order to clarify interpretation of scores. The percentile rank of a raw score is interpreted as the percentage of examinees in the norm group who scored below the score of interest (Crocker & Algina, 1986). We refer from now on to the percentiles ranking, allowing us to review the absolute changes of the small study sample within the bigger picture of a norm group of senior executives. The following graphs document the percentile rankings of the 2005 and 2006 program GELI results of the 11 participants who participated in this follow-up study.

**Table 3: Average raw scores and Standard Deviations (SD) of the GELI pre/post program**

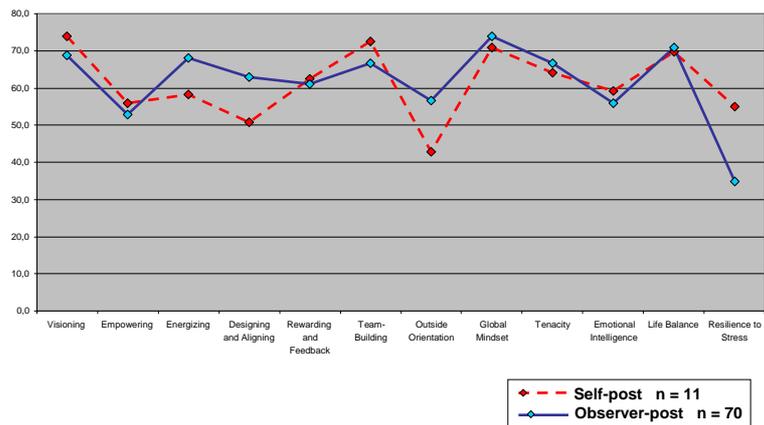
Dimension (raw score range)	Self pre		Obs. Pre		Self post		Obs. Post	
	n=11	SD	n=106	SD	n=11	SD	n=70	SD
Visioning (8-56)	46.7	4.4	44.9	6.6	47.5	4.7	46.5	5.4
Empowering (8-56)	42.6	4.6	39.3	9.7	42.3	5.4	41.7	7.8
Energizing (8-56)	44.5	5.0	42.7	9.3	44.2	4.5	46.1	6.4
Designing and Aligning (7-49)	34.8	6.3	33.9	8.9	35.4	6.5	37.4	7.1
Rewarding and Feedback (8-56)	38.8	6.2	38.6	9.3	42.6	4.8	42.2	7.9
Team-building (11-77)	60.5	5.5	53.5	9.3	60.7	4.8	59.1	8.4
Outside Orientation (5-35)	25.3	5.4	26.5	6.4	26.5	4.7	28.0	5.0
Global Mindset (8-56)	46.0	5.0	45.9	8.0	46.6	4.1	47.3	7.1
Tenacity (5-35)	29.8	2.5	29.8	4.4	30.1	2.9	30.4	3.4
Emotional Intelligence (12-84)	57.1	7.3	58.6	13.4	63.5	10.4	62.5	10.6
Life Balance (9-63)	46.2	7.9	49.5	8.6	51.2	6.3	51.5	5.6
Resilience to Stress (11-77)	39.2	11.0	29.0	7.6	33.0	13.3	26.9	8.8

Figures 2 and 3 (below) compare the 2005 and 2006 GELI percentile scores of the 11 participants. The participants' assessment of their own level of leadership competencies is more aligned with their observers' perception of them in the 2006 results (the gap between the two is smaller). This outcome may suggest that on average, one year after having taken the test for the first time, the executives possess a greater degree of self-awareness, and are more in touch with reality with respect to their own strengths and weaknesses.

**Figure 2: GELI percentile ranking: Self and Observer evaluation pre-program (2005)**



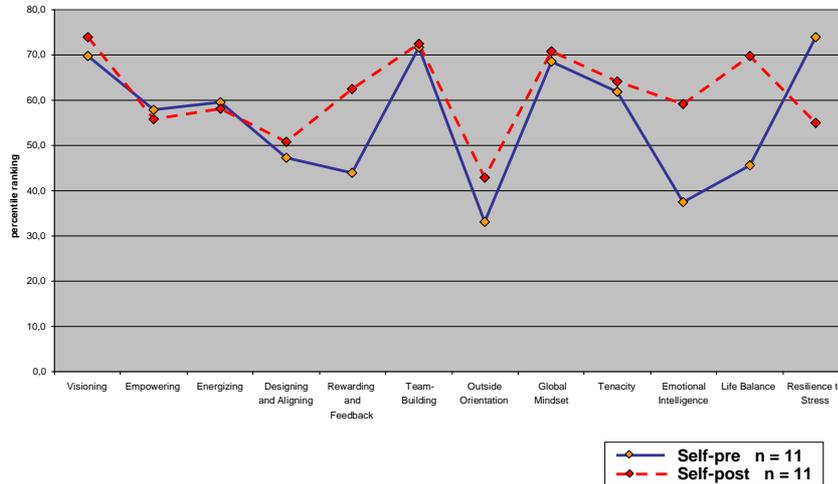
**Figure 3: GELI percentile ranking: self and observer evaluation post program (2006)**



Furthermore, we can detect that the executives' post-program self-rating (Figure 4) is higher than their self rating during the program, especially with respect to the dimensions *rewarding and feedback* (which moved from the 42nd percentile to the

62nd) *emotional intelligence* (from the 37th percentile to the 59th) and *life balance* (from the 43rd percentile to the 70th).

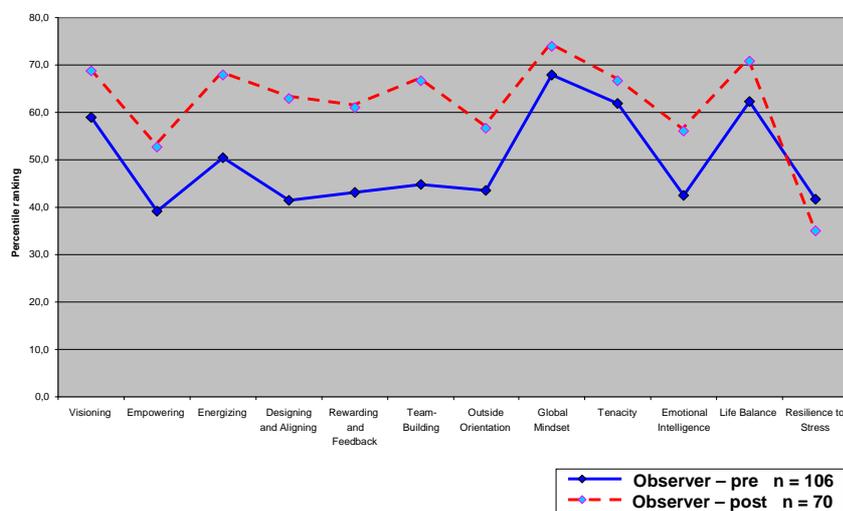
**Figure 4: GELI percentile ranking: self evaluation pre/post program**



It is worth mentioning that in the dimension *resilience to stress* we can observe a decrease in self-evaluation from the 74th to the 55th percentile. This finding is open to several interpretations. One is that there may have been some degree of self-delusion in the 2005 responses to items in this dimension (see Figure 2); in other words, the participants were not really aware of the degree of stress they were feeling. We can speculate that the lower 2006 score may have been influenced by a greater degree of self-awareness, that is, a more authentic sense of the level of stress in their lives. We consider this an improvement. We also note that the average score shows an increase in the perceived level of *life balance*, which we speculate will eventually help to reduce the stress measured by the resilience scale. Stress at work has been compared to an addiction, in the sense that a person is addicted to the activation state that is provoked by a certain doses of stress. And as any addiction, its impact on our normal functioning is cognitively underestimated and not readily admitted. However, through coaching and reflection the participant becomes more aware of the status quo. The insights gained open up the possibility of admitting realities: they may not be as resilient to stress as they initially believed. As they focus more on family and non-work activities (*life balance*) their awareness of stress and desire to change is reinforced. This explanation is also supported by research on predictors for positive outcome for other psychodynamic-based helping relationships (Crits-Christoph & Luborsky, 1990; Horowitz, Rosenberg & Kالهزان, 1992, Lorentzen & Høglend, 2005).

The observers' assessment (Figure 5) illustrates that the 11 participating executives are perceived to have improved on average more than 30% in percentile scores for the leadership dimensions *empowering* (from the 39th to the 52nd percentile), *energizing* (from the 50th to the 62nd percentile), *designing and aligning* (from the 41st to the 62nd percentile) and *team-building* (from the 44th percentile to the 66th).

**Figure 5: GELI percentile ranking: observer evaluation pre/post program (n= 106 pre-program, n=70 post-program)**



In summary, the preliminary findings suggest there has been: (1) an increase in the level of life satisfaction; (2) a probable increase in participants' self-awareness, as shown by comparing the 2005 and 2006 differences between self-assessments and observers' assessments in all leadership dimensions; and, (3) that some dimensions have higher percentile scores one year after the program. In particular, *emotional intelligence* and *rewarding and feedback* are ranked higher in both the self-assessments and the observers' assessments. We hypothesize that it is precisely in these *coaching* competencies that the transformational programs have higher and more consistent impact.

The quantitative exploration described above looked at what change could be noted after the program. Next, we supplemented these first indications that some change had occurred with qualitative information. In addition, the qualitative analysis allowed us to identify change facilitators in the process.

## **Qualitative changes: the participants' views**

The quantitative preliminary findings are enriched by the data from the semi-structured interviews, conducted *before* participants saw the second set of GELI scores. According to the interview transcripts, executives perceived the transformational leadership program as refreshingly different from other forms of learning in executive education programs. As we analyzed the transcripts, we looked for the changes through the journey of self-discovery that participants said were enhanced by the transformational program. Second, we looked for clues about *how* the change process occurred, and what elements fostered long-term outcomes.

Concerning the question *what* changed, we looked at repeated regularities in the participants' accounts of the effects of the leadership development program and found two main effects of note.

1. There seems to be an increase in *self-awareness* that helps to identify blocks that inhibit personal development. At the same time, the interviewees felt they now have a better understanding of their own driving values, and a clearer idea of their goals and desires.
2. Concerning improvements in specific *leadership behaviors*, executives become more people-oriented after the COL program (perceived improvement in the dimensions of listening, emotional intelligence, rewarding and feedback, and team building). These results converge with the quantitative findings as sign of convergent validity.

### ***Self awareness***

The increase in self-awareness is illustrated by examples from the transcripts. One participant commented on the specific clinical (psychodynamic) aspects of the program:

*“I began to realize the huge impact of my childhood experience on my present way of behaving. ... Due to the program I have become more aware of the complexity of human beings. I make now an effort to know my people better.”*

Another executive commented on the value of the program not only for himself personally and professionally, but also for the organization he works for:

*“The course lifted me to a higher level of emotional awareness and I am now in the habit of thoroughly evaluating professional opportunities both for my company and myself. ... In addition, I am taking more time for my wife and my children. I take every opportunity to make time available. Also, I feel that I have become a much better listener both at home and at work.”*

### ***Leadership behavior***

Concerning improvements in specific leadership behaviors, the key learning points mentioned focus on coaching skills. The four examples below, from three participants, demonstrate not only how they learned cognitively about listening, rewarding, feedback and team-building but also how they embraced emotionally the leadership

coaching approach. The impact of their experience during the program improved their own skills in creating a culture of trust and mentoring within their respective companies.

One commented: *“opening up and listening are for me the most important take-aways from the program.”* The ability *“to be more effective in building teams”* and an increased awareness of the need to *“create a culture of positive regard”* (becoming better at giving positive feedback) were themes brought up by many of the interviewees. They consider these abilities to be direct outcomes of the group coaching program. The expression *“an increase in emotional intelligence”* was also often used to describe the changes the business leaders experienced. One said: *“Now I listen first before giving the answer. My office does not have walls any more. I am more available to my employees.”* Another commented: *“Before the program I sometimes had difficulties connecting with my employees; now I am the chairman of mentoring and coaching in my company.”*

Remarks about having become more astute in understanding human relationships recurred in many of the interviews. One participant commented that:

*“The Challenge of Leadership program made me more aware of changes men and women go through. ... I developed a better understanding of my team and also of my wife’s current issues. ... Now I pay more attention to human interactions at work, especially with my team and my peers.”*

### **The change process: setting the stage for continual and sustainable transformation**

Regarding *how* change is facilitated through transformational leadership programs, four themes appeared in the interviews:

1. The *group coaching* sessions facilitated growing self-awareness and a sense of commitment to the group in terms of meeting self development goals.
2. The *action plans* were crucial in setting individual developmental objectives.
3. *Acting and experimentation of new behaviors* in the professional context were needed to crystallize changes and enrich an effective repertoire of behaviors.
4. Staying in contact with *a learning community* serves to maintain changes in the long-term.

### **Group coaching**

Concerning the importance of social interaction facilitated through group coaching sessions, one of the participants said:

*“It [being accountable to the group] makes it much harder for me to go back to automatic pilot, to fall back into my old behavior. Now every morning when I am shaving, looking in the mirror, I can see the faculty and my colleagues in the program. This visualization reminds me of the promises I have made to them about change. It keeps me on track.”*

Almost all of the people interviewed agreed that the coaching element of the program had a significant impact on their personal lives. The speed with which they became comfortable sharing very personal issues with the other participants, who were initially strangers, was astonishing to them: *“The first week was one of the biggest shocks in my life.”* *“All my shortcomings were on the table, a quite dramatic experience...”* Their surprise at how simple it seemed to be to create a safe, transitional space was noted in many comments. It made them realize that the high degree of trust in the group was a strong determinant of the success of the program. In addition, they felt this was an important lesson that could be taken back to their own home and work environment.

### ***Action plans***

The importance of having made explicit commitments was considered an important long-term facilitator of the change process. It became clear that participants viewed the action plan as a crucial element of achieving the desired behavioral change within the leadership development process. One executive commented how this commitment, made in presence of the faculty members/coaches and the group at the end of module 2 and repeated after module 3, had been extremely powerful, leaving a very strong impression: *“Working on my list [action plan] was initially painful but is now enjoyable.”*

Another explained how he found a way to counteract the desire to switch back to old habits:

*“When I realize that I am getting angry, I will reflect on it by writing about it in my diary in the evening, instead of reacting immediately and letting it out on the team.”*

The same participant noticed that his company team members seem to feel a new sense of responsibility and empowerment because he now reflects more before acting in the heat of the moment. *“It shows in the quality of their work. ... I think I am managing people more effectively, although it is difficult to judge.”*

Another executive told us about identifying concrete actions to improve a leadership competence (*team building*). *“When I first suggested to my employees that we have lunch together, they were very surprised.”* He had experimented with this in the COL module: *“In the first six months I felt much more at ease to experiment with different kinds of behavior. Presently, I have to be careful not to go back to my old controlling and grumpy self.”*

### ***Acting and experimenting***

Acting and experimenting are evidently crucial to incorporating a new repertoire of behaviors in daily life. A few of the participants mentioned that the program had shown them that they themselves were responsible for maintaining changes on a day-to-day basis in their professional and private life. One mentioned:

*“I realize that the goal of COL can only be to identify the key areas I have to work on. In the end, you have to make the changes yourself. This idea can be*

*hard to accept. But I am now prepared to accept that it is up to me to make the necessary changes.”*

This observation was also brought up by another executive who evaluated the program as *“extremely good in identifying the key areas but somewhat less effective in helping me make the changes.”* In making this comment, he also added, *“I realize that without having gone through the program, not much would have happened. I would have done just more of the same.”*

Another commented:

*“The program did not give me the instant solutions and concepts I was originally looking for. But it did highlight some key areas I needed to work on. Only at the end of the program did I realize that I may not get the ‘recipes’ directly. Indirectly, however, by working on myself I may end up getting such a recipe. What I have realized during the program is that it is not very constructive to demand that other people change. But if you start the change process yourself, you may be surprised. When you deal in a different way with people, they may also deal in a different way with you. And in this indirect way, you may get what you wanted.”*

### ***The learning community***

Finally, participants identify staying in contact with a learning community as a powerful source of motivation over the long term. Maintaining the changes in behavior after the end of each module was an issue for many of the executives. There was always the danger of slipping back into automatic pilot. To forestall this, the faculty asked them to check in with one another by e-mail. Furthermore, there was the presence of a *learning partner* or *peer coach*, a fellow-participant who would remind the other of his specific action plan or letter of intent. This person was also helpful in making suggestions on how to execute the action plan, and how possible obstacles could be overcome. This regular communication does not end with the last program module; on the contrary, our experience with previous COL cohorts shows that in most instances, mutual leadership coaching between the participants continues for years.

*“Having a learning partner and meeting up again with some of the participants in [location] was quite helpful to remind us of the experience we went through. It was also very useful to have [the faculty] around during these meetings.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

Indisputably, the pedagogies used in leadership interventions must be in sync with the particular needs of the participants. Best practices show that methods that facilitate the articulation of shared meanings and the construction of new realities can be extremely enriching for people that are immersed in them. These methods have been referred to in the literature as situated learning methods (Schrage, 1999). We argue that the most effective transformational leadership development programs will include

situated methodologies such as group coaching, 360-degree feedback, simulations and networking to stimulate making sense of reality in a community. The objective of this study was to explore, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the long-term effects of a transformational leadership development program based on situated learning methods.

We examined the long-term effectiveness of a transitional leadership development program (COL) that uses the clinical (psychodynamic) group approach as a theoretical and pedagogical framework. Unfortunately, given the difficulties in obtaining a bigger sample size, we can only make observations here that we hope will be further elaborated by future research. The good news is that the data pointed out some of the changes that occurred, as reported by participants and observers themselves, during and after the COL program. We have found support for the argument that transformational programs promote long-term individual changes. Thus, this exploratory study opens opportunities for future research, among them the use of the GELI as an instrument to capture change on a larger test-retest scale.

### **Have we found answers to our research questions?**

We framed our study with three questions: (1) what do transformational leadership programs transform?, (2) how does the change process occur?, and (3) how are behavioral changes maintained over time?

Concerning the first question, quantitative and qualitative data converged in two preliminary results:

- The transformational leadership development program described in this study increases participants' self-awareness. The insights gained during the journey of self-discovery in the COL program provide catalysts for further changes within participants' daily lives. These findings are in line with the outcome of larger studies on the impact of open-enrolment programs (Yorks, Beechler & Ciporen, 2007) in executive education.

This transformational leadership development program promotes measurable improvement in certain dimensions that have a strong coaching component, such as *rewarding and feedback* and *emotional intelligence*. Participants in our study appear to be applying their learning and experience with group leadership coaching, as practiced in COL. Studies integrating recent findings in affective neuroscience and biology with well-documented research on leadership and stress suggest that these skills are essential in order to develop sustainable leadership competencies (Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize, 2006). In this sense, leadership development focuses in building and using interpersonal competencies and networks that enhance cooperation (Day, 2001). Concerning the questions about how the change process occurs and is maintained, several change facilitators were identified through the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews:

- social practices, such as group coaching, networking and 360-degree feedback processes, which help to create safe environments for “pausing” and managing personal change;
- action plans designed as part of a process of self-discovery;

- an exploration of new selves (Ibarra, 2003, 2007) through a test-and-learn process that helps individuals shape and practice new behaviors.
- a learning community that supports results over the long term. Learning key competencies occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of a learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

## **Limitations**

First and foremost the sample size (n=11) of executives participating in the follow-up study clearly limits the significance of the results. The participants were self-selected, as nine of the original cohort of 20 chose not to be included in our study. It could be that the 11 who did participate in this study were more satisfied with the program, implying a bias towards positive results. Furthermore, the small sample size is a threat to the external validity of the study and the conclusiveness of its results. Due to professional changes (job or function) we had to accept that some of the executives would not have an identical set of observers for the post-program survey. This could affect the validity of the observers' pre/post-evaluation measure, but this effect was not explored. Furthermore, the value of the study results is also limited by the use of semi-structured interviews that were created especially for the purpose of this study. Hence, we do not have any quantitative evidence for the reliability of the finding of the interviews. Conclusions made here are therefore more descriptive and suggestive than inferential and conclusive.

We suspect that the difficulties in recruiting enough responses to undertake a study in the best possible conditions (same job, same observers, etc.) is one of the reasons that most institutions choose to evaluate their program immediately they finish or within short time thereafter. Most empirical studies choose periods equal or inferior to 12 months for post-intervention measurement (e.g. Evers, Bouwers & Tomic, 2006.; Toegel & Nicholson, 2005; Hirst et al., 2004 Boyatzis, 2002). Furthermore, most companies in the corporate world traditionally use a 12-month period to measure the performance of the business and their employees. Although the elapsed time of one year post-program appears to us as an adequate differentiator for a long-term effectiveness study, the exact timing could be explored further. The lag between *learning* and *facilitating* new leadership behaviors may be the expression of the interval between gaining new insight, and grasping and understanding how best to translate this knowledge into leadership behavior (Hirst et al., 2004). Thus, the lag may reflect the time taken to consolidate conceptual insight into procedural skills and behavior.

## **Future research**

Future research is needed to test the plausible propositions of this study on a bigger group with a more rigorous research design (observers/time-line). Other important areas of interest are to compare outcome measures on the behavioral-level (micro) to the organizational level (macro), possibly using different instruments

(personal/professional 360-degree multi-party feedback) and measuring the outcome at different time points post-program.

It may be worthwhile constructing a study that focuses on the outcome at different points in time after the ending of the program. Such a study could give us insights into whether there is such a thing as a typical “life-cycle” of behavioral change and insights from the participants’ perspectives.

A comparison with pre/post result of the GELI to other well-established instruments of leadership dimension could add to the validity of the results. It would be helpful to include in a future prospective study a control group of matched pairs of executives who have not received any form of leadership development (Evers, Bouwers & Tomic, 2006) and investigate groups with the same set of observers pre/post program (Toegel & Nicholson, 2005).

The focus of this study was on leadership competencies and behavior at the individual level. But there may be situational variables (organizational culture, etc.) that mediate the developmental process. Larger studies could look at the value of these parameters.

Hirst et al. (2004) found that new leaders learn significantly more than experienced leaders. The effects of leadership development practices may be influenced by leadership experience (novice, intermediate, senior). In light of this, it should be remembered that all the individuals in our sample group are senior executives.

Whatever the criteria for success, methodological questions about the measurement of variables will continue to haunt researchers studying transformational leadership programs due to the nature of the participants’ environmental complexity. In addition, researchers will face the following challenges: how to define successful outcomes; the right point in time to measure outcome; how to measure whether, and to what extent, intended changes have been internalized; and how to assess an increase in work productivity at the individual and organizational level.

Personal transformation implies that we have to abandon our old self; it means that we have to leave behind our old identity and speculate about who we would like to be or could be. To change means modifying our behavior sufficiently that it becomes permanent. Experience has taught us that change in the form of an identity transition can be promoted by social participation frameworks. We believe that transformational programs using these methodologies clearly open up possibilities of abandoning aspects of the old self while constructing new identities, new meanings and new ways of relating to others. For these reasons, we will continue to explore the transformational leadership journey, despite the questions that remain to be addressed.

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