Taking the Lead: Effectiveness of a Modular Coaching Program for Transformational Leadership Development

Nadjeschda Hebenstreit and Katrin Hinzdorf, Ph.D

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2006, 4(3), 52-63. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

Journal information:
www.ijco.info

Purchases:
www.pcpionline.com
Taking the Lead: Effectiveness of a Modular Coaching Program for Transformational Leadership Development

NADJESCHDA HEBENSTREIT AND KATRIN HINZDORF, PHD.

The present study concerns the evaluation of the LeadershipCircle (LC) coaching program designed for leadership development, combining individual and group coaching, interactive learning and buddy coaching. In order to maximize learning and stimulate transformation in leaders, the integral perspective was chosen as the frame of reference for all interventions. The theoretical background and concept behind the LC will be explained and the promising results of this innovative approach to personal transformation of leaders are presented.

It is a well researched fact that one of the most important factors determining the success of any organization is the quality of its leadership (Bloom et al., 2005). To date there are endless models describing appropriate strategies and tactics of successful leaders. The main question for professionals (such as HR managers, coaches, and trainers), however, still remains: How are powerful insights and lasting transformations in behavior generated? The answer to this question determines the success (and thereby the value) of costly training and coaching initiatives.

One of the main challenges appears to be the integration of knowledge on a fundamental level where it first enables shifts in mindsets followed by shifts in behaviors. Traditional training programs often do not initiate the quantum leap from understanding a concept to transforming deep-rooted mindsets and behaviors. The most valuable knowledge will remain superficial and without lasting effect if it is not truly integrated into our being. Short term change in training programs does often occur – however, observable transformations encompassing shifts on an emotional, cognitive and behavioral level seldom take place.

The failure of a training program to transform behaviors was also demonstrated in the dissertation project of one of the authors (Hinzdorf [née Priemuth], 2002). The study evaluated a personality training program designed to enable managers to use their motivation and volition to increase personal well-being and performance. Results from this evaluation study suggested that training alone is not sufficient to produce lasting effects in participants. The author argued for the support of coaching in order to enable participants to integrate new knowledge, understand and explore emotions, and to generate insights which will subsequently promote shifts in mindsets and behaviors.

In order to convince HR managers and other decision makers in corporations to invest in coaching initiatives, coaches need to accept the challenge of demonstrating that coaching can in fact be the missing link between acquiring cognitive understanding and integrating knowledge on a level deep enough to produce observable shifts and measurable results.

Some of the responsibilities of HR managers, trainers and coaches in
dealing with internal and external clients entail: boosting motivation; increasing teamwork; lowering the number of sick leaves; heightening commitment, creativity, and innovation; and (last but not least) increasing productivity. So the question we asked was: How can coaching support leaders to become the most outstanding leaders they can be, leaders who can co-create with others to reach these and even more ambitious goals?

**STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM**

The LeadershipCircle (LC) was designed for developing leaders in the business community as well as leaders from the public sector. In order to achieve maximum impact, the LC coaching program was designed to develop leaders by focusing on their personal transformation. The LC is a combination of individual and group coaching, interactive learning and buddy coaching (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Leadership Circle Program Structure**

![Diagram of Leadership Circle Program Structure]

**PROGRAM CONTENT AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

The goal of the LC is to introduce participants to an integral perspective of leadership—with a particular emphasis on seven leadership tasks from a systemic perspective (Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003).

We paid particular attention in designing this program to the assumption that transformations are more likely to occur if the human needs for control, relationship, and challenge are fulfilled (Schmidt-Tanger, 2004).

- Control. Participants retain the control of (and responsibility for) their learning process, progress and pace during all times. They are encouraged to keep a learning journal in which to document insights, questions and self-defined learning goals. Naturally, the participants also decide on the topics to be explored during their individual coaching sessions. Participants are constantly encouraged to apply and adapt all tools and models in their personal work environment. The resulting observable shifts in participants’ behaviors in turn produced positive observable responses and feedback from colleagues (and often even from spouses). These positive experiences enhanced the transformative process, shifted mindsets lastingly and strengthened the participants’ commitment to develop new strategies and behavioral responses for old problems.

**We paid particular attention in designing this program to the assumption that transformations are more likely to occur if the human needs for control, relationship, and challenge are fulfilled.**
• Relationship. Equal emphasis was placed on personal buddy contact between participants (rotating each month), peer interactions during the group calls, and coaching calls with personal coaches. These multiple interactions produced an intense and often touching experience of being supported through relationships. In many cases, the formed relationships seem to have grown into friendships for life. By their positive and solution-focused nature, these new relationships function as powerful role models for other relationships inside and outside of the work context.

• Challenge. The group coaching and exercise elements of the LC expose the participants to the integral perspective and provided them with practical tools to incorporate in their leadership behavior. These are novel concepts for many participants—they challenge old belief patterns and require that new behaviors be tested. For example, applying a systemic, solution-focused viewpoint to leadership questions is experienced as helpful, inspiring and sometimes provoking. The goal of the LC is not to train leaders as coaches, but rather to (1) provide leaders with a set of useful tools for self-reflection as well as communication, and (2) support them to adapt new mindsets around what makes them an outstanding leader.

LEADERSHIP FROM AN INTEGRAL PERSPECTIVE
In order to give the LC a scientific, yet intuitive, framework, we linked all LC content to the Integral Theory as described by Wilber (2001) (see figure 2). According to Integral Theory it is necessary to consider at least four different perspectives in describing the cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, physical, and behavioral development of humans. The four perspectives are visualized in four quadrants. (The authors note that Integral Theory is much more complex. However, due to restrictions regarding the length of this article, only the four quadrants are touched upon in this text. Please refer to the original publications for a deeper understanding of Integral Theory).

Quadrant upper left (UL) describes the internal representation of an individual (“Who am I? What is my internal reality? What mindsets that I hold are supporting my and others’ growth and development? Which mindsets do I want to challenge?”). Quadrant upper right (UR) describes the external representation of an individual (“What behaviors of myself and others can I observe? Which can I build on? Which behaviors do I want to modify or challenge?”). Quadrant lower left (LL) describes the internal representation of a group (“What is the culture within our system? What values do we operate on?”), and Quadrant lower right (LR) describes the external representation of a group (“Which systems do we employ that hinder or support the goals we want to achieve? Which systems and structures need to be implemented?”).

From a practical viewpoint, the four quadrants of the Integral Theory offer a coherent framework in which every model and every method can be organized and put in relation to other models and methods handling a different aspect of human reality. The goal of the LeadershipCircle is to strengthen competencies in each of the four quadrants and generally increase the participants’ capacity for observation, self-reflection and insight.
A particular emphasis is put on the systemic approach, a methodology located in the LR quadrant. The systemic approach allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the systems in which people operate and enables participants to reflect on their roles and relationships within their systemic context (Radatz, 2000). Operating from a solution-focused mindset makes it possible for participants to define and find solutions instead of inquiring deeper into problematic states. In other words, the LC continually encourages solution-focused questions, such as “What do we want and how do we get there?” rather than “What is the problem, how was it created and whose fault is it?” As a benchmark for leadership development, the seven core leadership tasks from a systemic perspective are used (Mussmann & Zbinden, 2003), which again can be attributed to one or more of the four integral quadrants:

1. **Capture the meaning and development of the entire system with all its components.**

In order to make effective decisions, all components of a system need to be considered from a meta-perspective. Useful questions are: What is the current situation? Who are the stakeholders? What effect will a change in one area or department have on the rest of the system? What are the relationships between the different components and people within the system? What change could have the most positive powerful impact?

2. **Take and show ownership of the leadership position.**

Especially young leaders, specialists who have been promoted into a leadership position but don’t feel they have the skills to lead, or leaders with a strong need to be liked often fall into the trap of not filling their leadership role. Distinctions between leading and leadership are made and leaders are encouraged to define how “taking and showing ownership” can be an authentic expression of their personality.

3. **Create room for solutions and discover solutions.**

Taking the leadership role for many leaders still implies taking full responsibility for strategy as well as outcomes. The advantages for creating room for co-development of solutions with others are explored and tested in real work situations.
4. Include and empower co-workers.
In order to include and empower co-workers, observations about these co-workers’ specific strengths, talents and needs must be made. Observation is a fundamental skill that is practiced during the LC program.

5. Acknowledge and honor the contributions of (senior) co-workers.
From a systemic perspective it is important that everyone, in particular those who have been part of a system the longest, are acknowledged for their contributions. Dignified ways to express sincere gratitude to others are explored.

In order to be seen and respected not as a function but rather as a person with a particular function within the system, it is vital for the person holding the leadership role to express emotions authentically. Participants are guided to discover and express their own needs in a way that respects the needs of everyone else involved. Better and deeper human connections are produced that increase the quality of work life within the team.

7. Invest in personal development.
Truly outstanding leaders are people who value personal development and have perfected their ability for self-reflection. Their quest is not only to be more efficient but also to be more human. They have discovered that outstanding results are more likely to be produced by co-workers who are allowed to bring intellect, heart and soul to the workplace every day.

The integral lens thus offers a useful framework not only for the seven leadership tasks but also for all exercises and methods selected to further the self development of leaders. The methods combine to help with diverse leadership challenges—such as (1) developing self-awareness through observation, goal-oriented and respectful communication with individuals, (2) powerful learning how to moderate group and team processes, and (3) increasing fun and humor in the work place. Throughout the program, learning is supported by an experiential approach. Newly acquired skills are applied in simulations during the group coaching day, followed by their application in real life situations.

The coaching approach ensures that participants never feel obliged to adopt the “latest” fashionable leadership model, but rather feel supported in their observation of what works and what is effective to generate positive relationships with self and others.

Recurrent discussions in pairs or small groups about observations and insights deepen the understanding and promote integration of new behaviors. The coaching approach ensures that participants never feel obliged to adopt the “latest” fashionable leadership model, but rather feel supported in their observation of what works and what is effective to generate positive relationships with self and others. Each participant is entitled to at least one individual coaching session over the telephone between the group coaching days. Participants use the individual coaching sessions to discuss specific personal challenges and tailor solutions that have evolved during the group coaching days to fit their personality and leadership style. Additionally, each participant selects one group member every month to be his or her “buddy”. The buddy teams are in weekly contact, supporting one another in their self-defined homework, and exchange experiences and tips for solving problems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS
Our hypothesis was that the combination of these different elements (individual and group coaching, buddy, development diary) would promote reflection, learning and lasting shifts in the seven leadership tasks. The evaluation results of two groups of 16 leaders from the public sector (school principals of various school types) are presented in this study.
An intervention can be rated as effective when it demonstrably produces sufficiently intensive or substantial changes relating to the program’s specific goals. Furthermore, as stated by Hager (2000) about interventions in the realm of training, coaching, or therapy, effectiveness needs to be demonstrated as transfer over time (persistence, duration). We thus tested the extent to which: a) the program enhanced the self-perceived competence of the participants in realizing the seven tasks of a leader, and b) their participation had a self-perceived impact on their school environment.

Program and participant progress was evaluated by delivering the same questionnaire at three measurement points for the group A: the first prior to entering the program, the second after completion of the program and the third five months after completion. One additional measurement point was scheduled four months prior to the beginning of the LC for the group B. The questionnaire was designed to specifically target mindsets and self-reported behaviors regarding the seven leadership tasks and contained 62 items that were summarized in seven main scales. The re-test allowed investigation of the stability of the measured effects after the participants had already left the program and thus lost part of their interpersonal support.

The “Delayed-treatment control-group design” (Neck & Manz, 1996) allowed for the separation of variations in response patterns which are the direct result of participation in the LC from variations caused by unrelated factors, such as being exposed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Schooltypes</th>
<th>Number of Teachers in Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>male: 13</td>
<td>secondary schools: 1</td>
<td>&lt;30: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>female: 3</td>
<td>elementary schools: 3</td>
<td>30-39: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>high schools: 6</td>
<td>40-49: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>vocational schools: 2</td>
<td>50-59: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior high school / secondary schools: 3</td>
<td>60-69: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pedagogical schools: 1</td>
<td>70-79: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80-89: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;90: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>male: 13</td>
<td>secondary schools: 3</td>
<td>&lt;30: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>female: 3</td>
<td>elementary schools: 5</td>
<td>30-39: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>high schools: 5</td>
<td>40-49: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>vocational schools: 2</td>
<td>50-59: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Junior high school / secondary schools: 1</td>
<td>60-69: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>70-79: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80-89: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;90: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Description of Participants

Figure 3. Experimental Design of the LC Evaluation Study
to the questionnaire or other measurement effects (Priemuth, 2002). In order to measure and demonstrate statistical significance, the classical magnitude of effect method was used. This approach has two main advantages over simply calculating significance: firstly, independence from sample size, and secondly, consideration of variance. To prove a significant impact of the LC we followed the requirement formulated by Cohen (1988) and Bortz & Döring (1995) that verifiable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Classification of effect sizes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-Test for dependent samples (within group comparison)</td>
<td>0,20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction test (between group comparison)</td>
<td>0,10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Classification of Effect Sizes (Bortz, 1995)**

---

**Figure 4: Procedure for Hypothesis Testing**
The statistical magnitudes of effects should show an effect size of 0.8 or higher. Figure 4 visualizes the statistical procedure for testing the hypothesis: The analysis of the LC data for group A clearly shows an effect size of 0.8 and above for all seven leadership tasks but one (leadership task #5: Acknowledge and honor the contributions of (senior) co-workers). In the second group, group B, all seven scales reached the effect size of 0.8 or above. The results can be taken as statistical verification for the effectiveness of the LC intervention. The four month post-measurement confirmed the effect sizes higher than 0.8 to be stable, which supports the

Figure 5: Results of LeadershipCircle Group A. Mean Values of the Seven Scales at Three Measurement Points.

* The deviations between m2 (directly after the LC) and m3 (5 months after completion of the LC) are random and statistically insignificant with the exception of leadership task #5. Here a medium sized effect can be demonstrated.

Figure 6: Results of LeadershipCircle Group B. Mean Values of the Seven Scales at Three Measurement Points.

* The deviations between m1 (prior to the LC) and m2 (first day of the LC) and m3 (directly after completion of the LC) and m4 (5 months after completion of the LC) are random and statistically insignificant.
notion that the LC is able to build sustainable leadership competencies as defined by the seven leadership tasks. The statistical evaluation results as shown in figures 5 and 6 demonstrate a significant development in respect to the seven leadership tasks (according to the questionnaire responses of participants). The within group effect sizes for each of the seven leadership tasks of measurement prior to the start of the LC and directly after completion of the LC are presented in figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7 : Effect sizes of Group A Between Measurement Point 1 and 2
*Within group comparison, unidirectional t-test for dependent samples

Figure 8 : Effect sizes of Group B Between Measurement Point 1 and 2
*Within group comparison, unidirectional t-test for dependent samples
The evaluation results support the notion that the combination of different elements in the Leadership Circle powerfully promotes learning, insights and sustainable shifts in behaviors. One interpretation of the different results for group A and group B in respect to improvements in the seven leadership tasks is that coaching is a process that unfolds its individuality depending on the people involved. It is unlikely that any of the groups experiencing the LC are going to have the same improvements in the same leadership tasks. The two groups also experienced different effects regarding shifts in the general climate of their schools as depicted in Figure 9.

**CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK**

The discussed effects strongly encourage a modular approach to coaching initiatives tailored for developing leaders in and across organizations. Preliminary data from other test groups such as the next two groups of school principals as well as a group of twelve leaders from a company in the wood-producing industry indicates that the concept is equally effective for in-house groups consisting only of leaders within one organization as well as in open groups consisting of leaders from different organizational backgrounds. However, specific benefits may vary for in-house or open groups (for example, strengthening of internal networks and cooperation for in-house groups and more powerful external networks for open groups).

One of the most frequent pieces of feedback we received from participants was their expressed wish to continue the coaching program beyond the four months. This, we felt, was an indication that internal as well as externally visible transformations take time to be integrated on a level affecting mindsets and behaviors. We have since added another day to the LC, focused on deepening observation skills and exposing participants to the basic premises of Spiral Dynamics (Beck & Cowan, 2005).

Outstanding leadership is not a technique or a carefully rehearsed behavior. Leadership requires awareness of one’s own humanness, the ability to relate to others
with compassion, the ability to acknowledge others’ potential and assist them in developing it while simultaneously focusing on business objectives. Since leadership development does not stop at the office reception desk, we greatly encourage participants to bring personal issues to the coaching conversations. If leaders develop from the inside out, it is not sufficient to introduce yet another leadership tool. Transformational coaching requires that we invite coachees to invest their whole selves in the process, and create a room safe enough for them to share their needs, mindsets, values, and behavioral patterns.

Even if coaches can and should demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention, they can never promise it. Every coaching process and every group is unique. Ultimately, lasting shifts rely on the choices each individual coachee makes. As coaches we can increase the likelihood of these shifts by holding the intention and the conviction in people’s potential to transform. As the German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe put it: “Treat others as if they were what they should be and you will help them to become what they could be.”

One of the authors is currently exploring the possibility to evaluate the program as her dissertation project and include other measurement instruments such as a 360 degree questionnaire delivered to colleagues. The LC is currently offered in Germany and the UK.

REFERENCES


Nadjeschda Hebenstreit, ACC

Phone: +49-(0)30-69564585
Email: n.hebenstreit@leadershipcircle.de

Nadjeschda Hebenstreit studied psychology in Germany and the USA and was trained as a coach and facilitator by CoachU, CoachingDevelopment and McKinsey & Company. Nadjeschda is past president of the ICF Germany and has been a
member of the organizing teams of three ICF European Conferences. She is owner and founder of Circumplex Coaching and co-developed the LeadershipCircle with her partner

Katrin Hinzdorf, PhD.

Phone: +49-(0)331-6473078  
Email: k.hinzdorf@leadershipcircle.de

Katrin Hinzdorf studied psychology in Germany, South Africa, and England, received her doctoral degree in Organizational Psychology from the University of Munich, and was trained in Team Coaching and in Individual Coaching at the centre of interdisciplinary system theory (ZiS) in Aarau, Switzerland. She is owner and founder of the Sophus GmbH and is an expert in conducting employee surveys which are followed by coaching interventions.
The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO) is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, www.pcpionline.com, to view and purchase our growing line of products.

If you have administrative questions, please refer them to our IJCO Office Manager, at officemanager@ijco.info. For advertising, marketing and operations inquiries, please refer them to John Lazar, IJCO Co-Executive Editor, at john@ijco.info. Please submit unsolicited manuscripts for peer review consideration to the IJCO office manager at officemanager@ijco.info.

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

Journal information: www.ijco.info
Purchases: www.pcpionline.com