

A Framework of Holistic and Sustainable Personal Leadership Development

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Abstract

Organisations and organisational development (OD) practitioners are challenged in that there are no formalised design principles for successful personal leadership development interventions. Very few South African studies have tackled this problem, and the research on holistic and sustainable personal leadership development has not been formalised. Therefore, the aim of the study was to conceptualise and create such a framework, showing the underpinning principles of personal leadership development.

The qualitative inductive approach to the research was based on the phenomenological, constructivist, interpretive research philosophy. Grounded theory was used to build the theory of holistic and sustainable personal leadership development. The study adopted a multi-step design that collected multiple forms of research data from 29 participants employed at two organisations in Gauteng, including solicited data (EQ-i^{2.0} and BeQTM), in-depth interviews, personal reflections, focus groups, questionnaires, field notes and literature. Data was also collected (through in-depth interviews) from six organisational and leadership development experts.

The findings revealed five meta-insights into the process of holistic and sustainable leadership development. The first was that the facilitator was at the heart of the development process, interwoven through each theme and a catalyst for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development. The second insight was the importance of cohort learning; the safe, supportive, sacred environment created by the group was paramount in facilitating the individual's and group's development. Thirdly, the programme's success and its sustainable results was dependant on the learners becoming vulnerable to challenge and shift their limiting paradigms. Moreover, the vulnerability of the facilitator enabled the learners to open up and become vulnerable. The fourth meta-insight was that for development to be sustainable, the learning must be experiential, personally meaningful and transferred and integrated to the learner's context and reality. Lastly, overwhelming evidence points to the fact that learning is a journey that takes time if it is to be holistic and sustainable, and therefore quick fix programmes will not yield the desired results. From the meta-insights, a framework for holistic and sustainable leadership development was constructed.

In practice, the findings provide insights for OD practitioners, facilitators, coaches, managers and organisations responsible for developing leaders. The study also offers the principles of a successful intervention. This insight and understanding can contribute to increased success in the field of OD, leadership development and management.

Keywords: Holistic Development, Organisational Development, Personal Development, Personal Leadership, Leadership, Sustainability, Coaching, Facilitation, Emotional Intelligence

Introduction

One of the key problems facing business today, in South Africa (SA) and globally, is the negative effect that leaders and employees with a low emotional quotient (EQ) have on their team and business outcomes (Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2002; Cherniss, 1999; Stein, Papadogiannis & Sitarenios, 2009). Many are ill equipped to deal with people effectively, build relationships and manage diversity (Kim, 2006). This may result in stalled change initiatives (Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Cahill, 2011), poor productivity, high staff turnover, lack of innovation, increased stress levels and a poor emotional climate at work (Goleman, 2002, Carbery & Cross, 2013). Despite this knowledge, we often do not have the luxury of hiring employees, managers or leaders who come with an already high EQ and highly developed leadership capacity. A potential reason for this is the serious skills shortage in SA (Allais & Nathan, 2014; Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016) that results in numerous leaders being promoted because of their sound technical skills with no consideration given to their leadership ability. This lack of leadership capacity implies that organisations should be developing their staff because personal leadership and leadership capacity are needed more than ever before.

In addition, the importance of systemic and holistic development for sustainable results has been noted (Smuts, 1926; Senge, 1990; Copley, 1995; Kibuka-Sebitosi, 2007; Viljoen-Terblanche, 2008; Kriek & Grayston, 2009) but there is insufficient research on the concept of holistic leadership development of adult workers in SA. The researcher was able to locate South African research that focused on the holistic development of schoolteachers teaching science (Kibuka-Sebitosi, 2007; Kriek & Grayston, 2009). However, apart from the notable efforts of Prins (2006), Bipath (2007), Viljoen-Terblanche (2008) and De Miranda (2011), the researcher was unable to identify research conducted in SA that explored or formalised the prerequisites or design principles for effective development interventions. In other words, the research on holistic development has not yet been formalised and accepted as a significant framework for personal development that may positively influence individuals and the systems to which they belong. Therefore, organisations are sceptical about investing in the development of their human capital when they are not sure whether sustainable development can actually be achieved and, if it can, what the principles of a successful intervention are. This research was conducted in response to the need for prerequisites or design principles regarding holistic and sustainable personal leadership development interventions within the South African context, and in an attempt to derive insight into the principles underpinning successful interventions.

Research Aim and Objectives

The research aim was to provide organisations with a local study that conceptualised personal leadership development holistically, defining the underpinning principles as well as the sustainability thereof. The aim could therefore be defined as follows: To explicate Personal Leadership Development through a Framework of Holistic and Sustainable Development. The research aim was translated into the following secondary objectives that guided the research process:

1. To create understanding of the ways in which a leader can be developed holistically and sustainably.
2. To derive insights into the prerequisites or design principles that are required for an intervention to be holistic and sustainable.
3. To explore the impact of a holistic development journey on an individual.
4. To distil the impact of a holistic development journey on an organisation.
5. To create a framework and derive meta-insights for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development.

Research Approach and Methodology

Qualitative research, which is dialectic and interpretive (Angen, 2000), was chosen as it suits the researcher's interpretivist paradigm. This choice rests on the assumption that there is no objective outcome to be arrived at, and is concerned with the way in which the research participant's world is discovered, explained and experienced and how the researcher influences this experience (De Vos, 1998; Conrad, 2011). The research was approached assuming the importance of understanding participants' perspectives and that it is important for researchers to subjectively and empathetically know the perspectives of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Conrad, 2011). During the interaction between the researcher and the research participant, the participant's world was discovered and interpreted by means of various qualitative methods (De Vos, 1998, Creswell, 2012). A qualitative approach was also favoured as it places emphasis on the understanding of complex, interrelated and changing phenomena (Sofaer, 1999) and is typically accepted as generating a greater depth of understanding of the study (Lund, 2012; Creswell, 2012).

As a result of the researcher's phenomenological, social constructionist, interpretive view that no single identifiable truth exists and reality is not seen as being objective, the research methodology, or plan for answering the research questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003), was constructivist grounded theory. This allowed for "inductive theories... grounded in systematically gathered and analyzed data" to be constructed (Bitsch, 2005:4) and the building of the theory of holistic and sustainable personal leadership development (Charmaz, 2014). The development of constructivist grounded theory is attributed to Charmaz (1995) who was a student of Strauss. Constructivist grounded theory methodology is known for "actively repositioning the researcher as the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning" (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006:2). This research followed Charmaz's approach and the researcher is, therefore, not a "distant expert" (Charmaz, 2000:513) but rather "the author of a co-construction of experience and meaning" (Mills et al., 2006:7). However, it must be noted that the Glaserian guideline of allowing themes to emerge from the data was followed rather than forcing the data into preconceived categories (Glaser, 1978). In addition, because "grounded theory typically begins with a research situation" (Viljoen-Terblanche, 2008:258), the literature review was only conducted once the qualitative research process had begun but Glaser's (1978) concept of theoretical sensitivity, which is "the need to read widely and be sensitive to what theory actually is" (Urquhart, 2013:136), was attempted throughout.

Research Design

The research favoured a multi-step design to cover the breadth and depth of the research aim as well as aid academic rigour. The first step in the design was to obtain a measure of the

participants EQ levels before and after the intervention as well as ensure that each research participant's 'story' was explored and an in-depth account of their developmental journey recorded. The purpose was to locate the essence of the individual experience and identify potential shared experiences amongst the group of research participants attending the intervention. This enabled patterns to be established, particularly concerning the criteria that were essential to holistic and sustainable development and the impact thereof.

The second step provided a measure of employee engagement before the intervention; this data was solicited to understand the initial behavioural framework. Managers of the participants attending the intervention were asked to complete a questionnaire (a year after the intervention) to gain insight into the development they noticed and the impact this had on the individual, the team and/or the organisation to establish if the results of the intervention were sustainable.

The third step in this research design involved repeating research Steps 1 and 2 in the same organisation, but with a different group of research participants to ensure that the research and the findings were more robust, thus adding to the academic rigour of the research. The fourth step involved repeating research Steps 1 and 2 in a second organisation. Again to add to the research findings in the first organisation and ensure more robust rigorous research. The fifth step of the research involved all participants completing a questionnaire (a year after the intervention) regarding their development. The purpose of this step was to determine the sustainability of the development.

The sixth step was to conceptualise a framework for developing leaders in a holistic and sustainable way by using information obtained from six learning and development experts. This data was collected by means of in-depth interviews. The purpose of this step was to create an understanding of the ways in which a leader could be developed in a holistic and sustainable way. The seventh step (conducted simultaneously with Step 6), also used the in-depth information obtained from six learning and development experts to synthesise the prerequisites that should form part of an effective intervention.

During the eighth step of the research, all data gathered (including literature for constant comparison) was integrated, synthesised and analysed. It must be noted that the steps in the design are not linear in nature so this was not done at the end as a last step, but rather began when the first piece of data was collected. Step 8 was to enable the finalisation of the theory constructed from the data and, therefore, to conceptualise the framework for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development, which was constantly refined throughout the research. This was achieved by using grounded theory so that the theory implicit in the data was able to emerge (Glaser, 1992).

The final step of the research involved conducting an internal audit of the researcher's field notes (these were documented throughout the research journey) to report on her personal journey, challenges and insights during the research process.

Research Sample

Sampling required for grounded theory is based on the concept of "theoretical sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:176) where sampling decisions are informed by the emerging concepts relevant to the developing theory. This means sampling decisions evolved during the research process and non-probability purposive sampling was preferred as it was not feasible, practical or theoretically sensible to do random sampling as is often the case with applied social research (Trochim, 2015). In addition, sampling could not be planned completely before embarking on the

study, and “sampling did not take place at a single point in the inquiry process but is a recurrent feature” (Jupp, 2006: online).

The sample for this study eventually comprised 29 participants employed at two organisations in Gauteng, SA. There were no restrictions of age, gender, position within the organisation and/or education (other than that the participants had to be literate and able to read and write in English). The managers of those attending the intervention were also included, as they were able to provide a meta-perspective on the personal leadership development achieved by these individuals. The population of managers for this study comprised six individuals. In addition, data was also collected from six organisational and leadership development experts who met the following criteria: (1) Experts in the field of OD with minimum 15 years working experience, (2) a suitable qualification in the field of OD (PhD level was preferred), and (3) a notable track record of accomplishment in developing individuals and organisations within the South African context.

Data Collection

The research involved the collection of multiple forms of research data, including pre- and post-assessments (EQ-i^{2.0} and BeQTM), participants’ self-reflection journals, focus groups, video-recordings, post-intervention questionnaires (1 year after completing the intervention), manager’s questionnaire (1 year after their staff completed the intervention), in-depth interviews (with OD experts), literature review and the researcher’s self-reporting journals and field notes. Multiple forms of data were collected to add to the robustness of the research findings and increase the trustworthiness of the study (Guba, 1981; Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Shenton, 2004). Providing a number of different sources of data also assists in minimising distortion from a single data source or a biased researcher, as may be the case when data is based on a single application of only one measure (Field & Morse, 1985).

The data collection methods were dominantly qualitative methods allowing for as much data and as many variables to be recorded as possible. The only statistical/mathematical quantitative data collection tools used was the EQ-i^{2.0} and BeQTM, which were added as a support for the qualitative data. The use of these assessment instruments does not constitute a mixed-methods approach, as the research study is essentially a qualitative study with the EQ-i^{2.0} and BeQTM adding supporting data to further enrich the picture of the impact of holistic development on the individual and the organisation respectively. In addition, a multi-model method of data collection was preferred because of the value and robustness it added to the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 20015; Viljoen-Terblanche, 2008; Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making meaning from the collected data (Simon, 2011), and involves the researcher immersing herself in the data, holistically examining it, organising it, synthesising it, allowing themes and patterns to emerge, interpreting and discerning what needs to be shared, and how to present this to the reader (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data analysis has been described as both an “art” and a “dance” (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), and is an iterative, reflexive process (Stake, 1995). As with most qualitative studies and true to the interpretivist paradigm, an inductive “bottom-up” approach to analysing the data was adopted (Creswell, 2012). This means that the data collected was examined to identify more general themes that were used to interpret and gain meaning from the data with analysis beginning as soon as the

first piece of data was gathered (Stake, 1995; Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2012). The focus was emic in nature and “on the interrelated aspects of the setting, group, or person under investigation” where the “social context of events, thoughts, and actions becomes essential for interpretation” (Schutt, 2011:322). In essence, the process of data analysis was about understanding and making sense of data to formulate answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2012). This study attempts to describe the different dynamics that enable holistic and sustainable personal leadership development from various perspectives (the participant’s, the organisation’s and the OD expert’s) to draw meta-insights and construct a framework for this phenomenon. Therefore, all data gathered from all data collection methods including literature was assembled into themes and categories.

Grounded theory began from the moment the first piece of data was collected. As such, the data analysed from Step 1 through Step 5 started with the researcher (and co-researchers) immersing themselves in the data. The second step was to identify emergent themes through reading, re-reading and coding. Here the technique used by Lin (2013) was followed, and combined conceptual phenomenology guidance with grounded theory analysis principles (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to facilitate data coding. Open coding was used to allow themes to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The naming and categorising of phenomena through close examination of the data (De Vos et al., 2005) was tentative at this stage as the theme needed to cut across the data before it could be confirmed (Simon, 2011). Thirdly, the secondary constructs or researcher constructs were identified (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007), which were abstractions of the first-order constructs, and grouped them into sub-themes. This was done using a combination of ATLAS.ti and manual analysis, and involved using the researchers’ theoretical knowledge, personal experience and reflexive practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Urquhart, 2013).

It must be noted that it was only toward the end of the analysis, that all data from all three groups, their managers and the experts could be combined. Only then through the process of developing a tentative understanding of the phenomenon of holistic development, testing it against reality and constantly revising it, the inductive analytical abstract categories emerged. Through this process the theory was constructed and the framework for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development was constructed.

Findings

The findings revealed five meta-insights into the process of holistic and sustainable leadership development. The first was that the facilitator was at the heart of the development process, interwoven through each theme and a catalyst for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development. The second insight was the importance of cohort learning; the safe, supportive, sacred environment created by the group was paramount in facilitating the individual’s and group’s development. Thirdly, the programme’s success and its sustainable results was dependant on the learners becoming vulnerable to challenge and shift their limiting paradigms. Moreover, the vulnerability of the facilitator enabled the learners to open up and become vulnerable. The fourth meta-insight was that for development to be sustainable, the learning must be experiential, personally meaningful and transferred and integrated to the learner’s context and reality. Lastly, overwhelming evidence points to the fact that learning is a journey that takes time if it is to be holistic and sustainable, and therefore quick fix programmes will not yield the desired results. From the meta-insights, a framework for holistic and sustainable leadership development was constructed.

To enable the creation of the holistic and sustainable personal leadership development framework, it was necessary to examine the complex interrelationships between each theme, category and the attributes of the categories. These meta-insights were the culmination of a lengthy data analysis process including the literature review, the researcher’s experience in the field of OD and leadership development, her observations of the participants during the intervention (recorded in extensive field notes), and much study and reflection on the networks that emerged during the data analysis. This process required “puzzling out” and problem-solving (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to build an inductive framework that illustrates the dynamic relationships among the concepts and themes that emerged from the data. The resulting framework for holistic and sustainable personal leadership development (see Figure 1) is aimed at enabling OD practitioners and organisations to enhance the quality of their leadership development interventions and increase the return on investment both participants and organisations receive post-intervention.

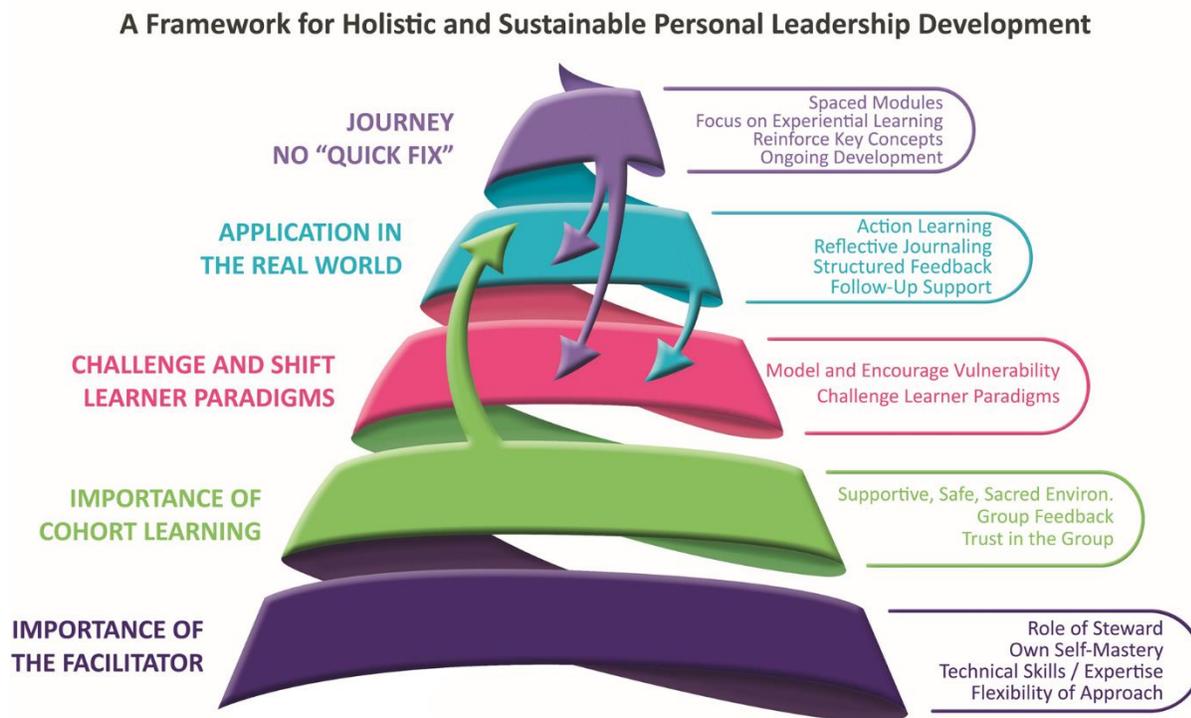


Figure 1. A Framework for Holistic and Sustainable Personal Leadership Development

The spiral image used for the framework in Figure 1 illustrates that holistic and sustainable personal leadership development is an ongoing process where each aspect or element of the process impacts and influences the next element of the process. The spiral starts (at the base of the diagram) with the importance of the facilitator and proceeds through the process of the cohort forming and the importance of cohort learning. The facilitator and cohort then enable the next part of the process: challenging and shifting of learner paradigms, which is inextricably linked with the application of learning in the real world. The entire development process is an ongoing journey that takes time and there is no “quick fix” solution. Each aspect of the

framework will now be elaborated and discussed, including the purposeful use of colour and what each colour in Figure 1 represents.

Discussion

The framework starts (at the base of the spiral) with the **Importance of the Facilitator** because the facilitator sets the context of the intervention and impacts every other aspect of the process. The facilitator is like a golden thread, interwoven through each theme and key aspect of the framework contributing to holistic and sustainable personal leadership development. The facilitator's psychological attributes and technical expertise are both paramount to the success of the intervention. This is especially true in the case of this research because the facilitator was responsible for the design, development and delivery of the intervention. Regarding psychological attributes, the facilitator must have achieved high levels of self-mastery, and must have adopted the role of a steward to be mature enough to allow the process of development to be learner-centred. Although the facilitator must be highly skilled, the facilitator is not to be a "sage on a stage" who delivers lessons to the learner. Rather, the journey of learning is co-created with the learner as an equal participant. The facilitator must provide the skills and expertise of designing a programme architecture with solid theoretical underpinnings that incorporates coaching, NLP and adult-learning theory including, but not limited to, experiential action learning, humanistic learning, constructivism, transformative learning, dialogue education and integral theory. Although the specific tools or models the facilitator uses are not that important to the process, the research revealed that it was not possible to facilitate holistic and sustainable personal leadership development without solid learning theory underpinning the programme. A combination of purple and indigo represents the facilitator because purple is indicative of deep meditation, spiritual awareness, intuition and sound judgement while indigo is indicative of wisdom, enlightenment, integrity, deep sincerity, emotional depth, devotion and spiritual realisation.

The next element of the process and framework is the **Importance of Cohort Learning**, where the facilitator forms an integral part of the group and is responsible for establishing the group as a supportive, safe and sacred learning space. This space allows the group to offer each other valuable feedback (including highlighting strengths and offering critique regarding areas of development), diverse perspectives, friendship, shared experience and a sense of belonging. Without this, holistic and sustainable personal leadership development will not be as effective, and will potentially even be thwarted. The supportive, safe, sacred space and group feedback enabled the group to develop a deep sense of trust and rapport. In turn, it enabled the group (including the facilitator) to challenge each other's paradigms and become vulnerable enough to expose and shift limiting beliefs. The openness to being challenged and becoming vulnerable allowed the individual to gain new perspectives and an expanded worldview. The Importance of Cohort Learning is represented by the colour green because it is indicative of balance, harmony, growth, communication, support and the ability to nurture and love unconditionally.

As a result of the first two elements of the framework, the process spirals upwards to **Challenge and Shift Learner Paradigms** because the facilitator and cohort make it possible for the learner to be open to being challenged or to bring their challenges and limiting beliefs into the group so they can be dealt with. This process requires enormous vulnerability, which is very uncomfortable for most learners so the supportive, safe, sacred space is essential. In addition, the research showed that the facilitator's vulnerability and openness was a key factor in assisting the learners to open up and become vulnerable. The researcher used (and taught the learners how to

use) a specific technique she had developed to support the learners in successfully overcoming their limiting beliefs. Therefore, the framework illustrates that with the support of a skilled facilitator, a safe, supporting and trusting environment, and effective techniques to challenge limiting paradigms or belief(s), the process of holistic and sustainable leadership development is facilitated. Challenge and Shift Learner Paradigms is represented by the colour pink as it is indicative of discernment, insight and self-knowledge, while offering comfort and understanding to alleviate negative thoughts that often accompany limiting beliefs.

The fourth core element of the framework (as shown in Figure 1) is the necessity for **Application in the Real World**. Again, the three preceding elements of the framework (namely, Importance of the Facilitator, Importance of Cohort Learning and Challenge and Shift Paradigms) all influence and enable the learners to apply their learning in the real world. This is because learners have become vulnerable and brought their personal real-world experiences to the fore. In addition, the use of actioning learning activities, reflective journaling, structured feedback (from assessment tools or group activities) and follow-up support is essential to the process of holistic and sustainable personal leadership development. As illustrated in Figure 1, by the arrow pointing from Application of Learning in the Real World down to Challenge and Shift Learner Paradigms, that by applying learning in their real worlds, the learners' paradigms were again challenged and shifted. This illustrates that both elements positively reinforce and influence each other. It can also be seen from the arrow pointing from the Journey (No "Quick Fix") element of the process down to Application in the Real World that the learning needs to be a journey to make it possible for the learners to have sufficient time to apply their learning in the real world. Application of Learning in the Real World is represented by the colour turquoise because it is indicative of deep understanding, openness, integration, practicality and flexibility.

The final element of the framework illustrates that the process of personal leadership development needs to be a committed **Journey** (No "Quick Fix") over an extended period (a minimum of six months, and preferably nine months) if it is to enable holistic development and yield sustainable results. A journey over an extended period allows the learner sufficient time to gain in competence and confidence through the programme, and apply the skills being learnt (such as setting goals, managing emotions, communicating effectively, managing interpersonal relationships, challenging beliefs, overcoming fears, making better decisions, problem-solving and more) to achieve results that are holistic and sustainable. Quick fix interventions are often a waste of the individual's time and company money because experiential learning involving integration, assimilation, reflection and application of learning is not sufficiently facilitated. The reader will also notice that the spiral continues upwards indicative of a lifetime journey that has no end. In other words, the process of holistic and sustainable personal leadership development is an ongoing process that opens up a vista of opportunities for continued growth and development after the intervention. Organisations can play a significant role in this continued journey by facilitating mentorship programmes, ongoing support and follow-up after the intervention because learning and development have no end. The Journey (No "Quick Fix") is represented by the colour indigo because it depicts the learner's path to wisdom, enlightenment and spiritual realisation. Initially, the journey and development process started in the hands of the facilitator, and now it has been passed on (through the process of holistic and sustainable leadership development) to the individual to continue and deepen.

Conclusion

This study succeeded in shedding light on how an individual can be developed holistically and sustainably including the fact that learners develop themselves and the intervention and facilitator are just important catalysts who create and hold a safe, supportive and sacred space for the journey to unfold. The approach to development must be a systemic, multifaceted approach that involves developing all aspects of the individual including body, mind and soul as well as their various life dimensions. The prerequisites for a successful, effective intervention involve the importance of the facilitator, the cohort, the challenges and vulnerability the learner faces, the application of learning in the real world and the importance of the development process being a journey. These insights enabled the construction of the framework using “abductive logic involving both imaginative interpretation and reasoning about experience” (Charmaz, 2008:167) to include the researcher’s “interactions with people, perspectives and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006:10).

This paper is also concluded with the acknowledgement that in setting out to understand holistic personal leadership development there will always be a part of reality that exists that cannot be seen and, therefore, it cannot be given a full answer. The framework presented is based on the reality that was possible to see through the eyes of the research participants, the eyes of the literature and the researcher’s eyes at the time of the research and within the given context of the research. The vastness of the study of holistic and sustainable personal leadership development is also acknowledged and readers of this paper are invited to draw on their experiences within the field of learning and development and to remain sceptical and curious about making the learning, gained through reading this thesis and framework, relevant to their practice.

International and Managerial Implications

In practice, the findings provide insights for OD practitioners, facilitators, coaches, managers and organisations responsible for developing leaders. The study also offers the principles of a successful intervention. This insight and understanding can contribute to increased success in the field of OD, leadership development and management.

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