Towards an Explanation of Leadership Learning

Leadership learning through lived experience

In the conclusion to Chapter 5 I suggested a framework, Figure 5.1, as sufficiently broad and inclusive to integrate and cohere extant theory of informal leadership development and principles of experiential learning. This is important, as it enables a simple argument to be put forward outlining how leadership learning occurs through lived experience. However, such a broad and simple argument fails to explore and illuminate the underlying influences on leadership learning that lie behind the generic headings. The detailed nuances of influences and their interaction in particular contexts are thus the focus of this chapter. To reveal underlying influences and to be able to explain how these operate together in a systemic manner within particular contexts required the use of bodies of theory that had not previously been applied together to the field of leadership learning.

Leadership learning through a range of lenses

I recall presenting a paper at a conference in which I explored ideas from sociology and psychology illustrating how each greatly informed on the other. My mistake was not recognising the heresy of my act. My colleagues appeared to be all sociologists. To these folk I was proverbially mixing oil and water. My view is pragmatic. If knowledge can provide insight wherever it comes from, then it’s well worth the risk of ‘mixing and matching’. With that justification asserted, the broad areas of literature utilised in this study are:

- Salience – prominence of a phenomenon.
- Social learning – observation, enactment and self-efficacy.
Towards an Explanation of Leadership Learning

- Situated learning – career pathways and apprenticeship through participation.
- Identity development and the notion of ‘becoming’ – aspirational identity.
- Structure and agency duality.

It is through the fusion of these five bodies of work into an interrelated whole that a greater illumination and understanding of leadership learning is created and mapped out. This chapter will be structured into two parts:

- Part A – Insights into influences on leadership learning: What influences shape leadership learning and how do these operate? Part A will outline a group of interpersonal influences of observed, enacted and situated learning, and intrapersonal influences of identity, salience and self-efficacy. These two groups will be argued to work in an interdependent and systemic manner. A model is illustrated to explain this systemic process of leadership learning through lived experience.
- Part B – Insights into contextual variations of leadership learning: How does context affect such influences on leadership learning? Part B adopts a contextual examination of the argument from Part A. Three contrastive insights are drawn between the following groups: public and private sectors; male and female managers; employed managers and self-employed owner-managers.

Through this structure and movement from identifying influences and illuminating contextual variation, the chapter provides an argument to the original puzzle that has shaped this book: How have managers learnt how to lead?

Part A – Insights into influences on leadership learning

The underlying influences identified through the four cases in Chapter 7 are interpreted here through the lenses of: salience, situated learning, social learning and identity development – these four areas have been explored in detail in Chapter 3. Such perspectives have not previously been drawn together and integrated to make sense of leadership learning. The antecedents of these bodies of knowledge are perhaps not