A Leadership Development Programme: A Case Study of Transformative Learning in Qatar[1]

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Abstract

Leadership development is an important issue for Qatar as it strives to achieve the ambitious goals set out in its 2030 National Vision (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2015). Various resources are being invested, but often with minimal results, forcing Qatar to continue to rely on expatriate expertise. Transformative learning experiences that change the deeply held beliefs, worldviews, and frames of reference of what it means to be a 21st century leader in Qatar are needed. This paper presents the case study of an executive leadership development programme to identify key success factors or inhibitors that fostered or hindered transformative learning experiences. It includes in-depth interviews conducted over a 10-month period during 2015. Additional rich data of the participants' experiences were obtained from their blogs, written assignments, and organisational documentation. A thematic analysis identified 11 themes, the inclusion of which fostered transformative learning or, the absence of which, hindered transformative learning: (1) identifying stakeholder expectations, (2) conducting a respected selection process, (3) appropriate English levels, (4) alignment between content and the participant's educational and cognitive skills, (5) time and commitment allocated to a well-structured pre-programme and a (6) post-programme stage, (7) in-depth awareness of the participants' professional and cultural contexts, (8) inclusion of autonomous components, (9) inclusion of personal and cultural interactions, (10) an acceptable balance of travel, stress, uncertainty, and course intensity, and (11) a group dynamic. There were indications the intensity of the programme pushed the participants beyond the required state of disorientation necessary for transformative learning and into one of being overwhelmed and stressed.

Keywords: transformative learning, leadership development, case study, discourse, critical reflection, lived experience

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[1] Ethical clearance: The EdD Virtual Program Research Ethics Committee from the University of Liverpool gave ethical clearance to this study on 9 February 2015.

Introduction

Regardless of culture, organisational context, or industry sector, the issues surrounding leadership have essentially remained constant. Recognition of the importance and benefits of gaining understanding of leadership has made studying those issues a legitimate use of resources. Yet, due to its complexity, there are still gaps in knowledge and areas of contention in basic themes such as whether a leader is born with inherent qualities of leadership or if it is a learnable skill and, if so, the best way of encouraging development of those leadership skills (Northouse, 2012). This article presents a case study based on an executive leadership programme (ELP) that was run for leaders and potential leaders of a sports industry organisation located in Qatar during 2015 (Schnepfleitner, 2017).[2]

Qatar has stated its ambition to become the regional leader in a variety of sectors and is striving to align tradition with new ways of doing things within its organisational context (Dorsey, 2015; Kamrava, 2009). Research has shown strong indicators that the competencies associated with transformative learning—being receptive to alternative viewpoints, emotionally open, capable of change, being reflectively aware and astute at guiding actions, and being able to motivate others—have the potential to help executives become better leaders (Brock, 2010; Ciporen, 2010; Mezirow, 1997).

Only in the last 30 years has some research focused specifically on the field of leadership development as a separate topic of scholarly attention (Day et al., 2014). This means research on executive leadership development programmes, through the lens of transformative learning in the areas of Qatar and the Middle East are rare, making it both relevant and timely to attempt to answer the following question: "What are the key success factors and inhibitors of a transformative learning experience in a leadership development programme designed for a Qatari organisational context?"

The approach was a single, qualitative, local knowledge case study. It was both instrumental, with the clear purpose of attempting to improve future programmes, and explanatory by seeking causal links or interrelationships between the programme, the context, and the phenomenon of transformative learning (TL) in order to build a story with a rich understanding. The data were drawn from multiple sources that included pre- and post-programme, semi-structured, conversational interviews with the three main sets of stakeholders, documentation from the involved training institute, their final report, and the participants' blog diaries and final written assignments.

Theoretical Framework

Three areas of interest were taken into consideration to theoretically support the research: leadership development programmes, the Qatari context, and TL theory.

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[2] This paper is derived from Frances Schnepfleitner's doctoral thesis.

The first leadership programmes were developed in military schools and academies and concentrated on identifying the "great man" in their midst and then teaching them by example (Thomas, 2008). The earliest organisational programmes were skill and management focused and aimed at the top tier employees. In the 1980s the divide between leadership and management behaviours became the focus (Hunt, 1999), which made organisations acutely aware of both the complexity and importance of leadership.

In some fields, participation in a leadership programme has become a rite of passage for aspirant leaders and "telling CEOs these days that leadership drives performance is a bit like saying oxygen is necessary to breathe" (Feser et al., 2015, p. 1). Managers understand leadership is related to profitability and in multiple reports have identified leadership as their most pressing organisational issue, but feel it is not being effectively addressed by business schools and development programmes (Daily & Johnson, 1997; Lucy et al., 2014; Saloner, 2010).

House and Aditya (1997, p. 418) stated, "Leadership is embedded in a social context," but research has largely ignored the kinds of organisation or culture leaders are functioning within. The consensus is that there remains insufficient research in relation to the precise effects of context and there is an emergent realisation, there should be an approach that "embraces local context and embraces the complexity and chaos that is present" (Grandy & Holton, 2013, p. 431).

Qatar is a tribal society and divided into hierarchical classes. Although tribal connections are beginning to blur, they still play both overt and covert roles in all aspects of Qatari society through social status and political affinity (Al-Muhannadi, 2013). The religion of Islam is an additional, binding, identity factor between families, tribes, and Gulf countries and encompasses all aspects of Qatari life, with personal identity coming from the place within the family and the family's status and origin in society (Schwartz, 2014).

The average Qatari organisation is rich in complexities that include specific human resource laws, distinctive managerial and leadership practices, and strong influences on work practice from culture, religious, and gender norms (Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). The culture is deemed fatalistic and collective, high in power distance, low in individualism, high in masculinity, and high in uncertainty avoidance (Al-Omari, 2008). These traits mean that an unequal distribution of wealth and power is acceptable or legitimised; Qatar concentrates power among relatively few, with seniority coming from connections and "who you know" rather than merit (Bogdan et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014).

Challenges facing individuals, leaders, and whole nations require adjustment or change to their inherent frames of reference. This makes it relevant to research an ELP through the lens of TL, an adult learning theory that, in an educational setting, is based on promoting change and challenging learners to "critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. xi). As a theory with constructivist underpinnings, it presupposes that a person's established and taken-for-granted frames of reference are capable of change and are then able to guide a "deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions" (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 104). Transformations can occur suddenly and be epochal and life changing (Snyder, 2008), or can arise from an accumulation of insights. It will involve, to some degree, parts of critical reflection, individual experience, and voluntary dialectical discourse and will also include, either fully or in part, the following ten identified phases:

1. A disorientating dilemma
2. Self-examination

3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action

6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan

8. Provisional trying of new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

    (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

Currently, TL practice and research are most prevalent in formal educational settings, but there is growing interdisciplinary interest and a call to broaden the focus of TL research because some aspects are deemed as having been researched to the point of redundancy (Taylor & Laros, 2014). Therefore, this research aimed to contribute to the TL literature in two areas. Firstly, little emphasis has been put on identifying factors that trigger or foster TL, nor on the challenges that cause hindrance—especially given that not all adults are self-directed learners capable of bringing about their own transformations (Taylor & Laros, 2014). Secondly, Taylor (2009) suggested that awareness of context is of equal significance to the core elements of critical reflection, individual experience, and dialogue. Therefore, context was taken into account in addition to the role of the three core elements.

When challenges to our perspectives bring us to the edge of our comfort zone it is human nature to resist emotional changes or a reframing of our existing worldview by using defence mechanisms such as intellectualisation or denial (Malkki, 2010). However, by using the deepest kind of critical reflection, we can "become more aware of their presence and influence in our lives" (Dirkx, 2012, p. 403), which leaves us better informed as to whether we will intentionally change or maintain those perspectives. Mezirow (1997) posited that the only way to judge the authenticity, the intent, or meaning behind a statement is to "engage in discourse to validate what is being communicated" (p. 6) because it is through reflective discourse that a person can better examine the evidence, arguments, and any alternative points of view. This discourse with others is the "safety net for an individual's newfound or revised assumptions" because they are reassured of their objectivity, and it becomes the medium to put critical reflection into action (Lewis, 2009. p. 9).

Most of our meaning perspectives are acquired through cultural assimilation whereas specific stances we take, such as "positivist, behaviourist, Freudian, or Marxist perspectives, may be intentionally learned" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Because we are moulded by those perspectives, we may be biased in our interpretations of individual experiences without realising it. It is only by exposing our own lived experiences to critical reflection and dialogue and comparing them to the lived experiences of others that we can begin to uncover those biases or reassure ourselves of their objectivity. This is one of the driving forces of TL (Fullerton, 2010; Lewis, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1997). In this way none of the core elements stands alone, but each supports and enhances the rest (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), and all three lie within a context.

Methodology

How any research is designed should depend on what the researcher wants to know (Cohen et al., 2011) and "different kinds of questions will lead you to different kinds of projects" (Thomas, 2014, p.

1). In this instance, by using the criteria of a case study, outlined by Thomas (2014) as subject, purpose, approach, and process, the posed question led the researcher towards a qualitative case study design. Firstly, it was a local knowledge case study because the question stemmed from the researcher's desire to look at the complexity of something specific within their professional context, from multiple angles or perspectives using many data sources (Thomas, 2011). Secondly, it was instrumental and explanatory because it was done with a clear purpose of informing and improving future leadership development programmes, specifically within the Qatari organisational context. Thirdly, the research approach aimed to test the existing theory of TL by using it as a lens to identify those factors and give explanation in an illustrative way.

To ensure research validity, rigor, and trustworthiness, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adhered to. Participants, when confronted with the research outcomes recognised them as fair, credible representations of their experience. According to the literature, one of the core strengths of case study is its ability to answer the what and the how questions and, as in this case, to tease out thick, descriptive explanations of what factors fostered or inhibited the phenomenon of TL to occur and how to encourage them to be transferred to future programmes (Thomas, 2011). Dependability and credibility were ensured by constant auditing by the lead researcher's university to demonstrate how conclusions had been reached and confirm the findings were indeed derived from the data.

Participants

Eight participants attended the ELP. One was in a senior leadership position, three had low- to mid-range seniority, and four were not in leadership positions but held various levels of responsibility. All were Qatari nationals and aged from late 20s to late 40s. All but one was married with family responsibilities. To travel to this extent outside Qatar was a new experience for all and none had participated in such a programme previously. Additionally, three of their direct managers, also Qatari nationals, were interviewed. The twelfth interviewee, an expatriate, acted as the liaison between the organisation and the training institute that developed the ELP, and was also responsible for obtaining feedback, results, and writing the final report and recommendations.

Data Collection Methods

In a distinctly qualitative social research approach, data were collected using methods "flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced" (Ormston et al., 2003, p. 4). As a good case study attempts to treat phenomena holistically and in alignment with qualitative data collection, the researcher gathered data from multiple sources including in-depth face-to-face interviews and diverse documentation (Cohen et al., 2011).

Pre-programme interviews of 20 to 30 minutes were conducted with all 12 participants. Second interviews of 35 to 45 minutes were conducted with the ELP participants within three months, and with the representative and managers between six to seven months, post programme. All were recorded and professionally transcribed and quality controlled. All pre-programme organisational documentation and information handouts were reviewed and during the 9-week programme, the researcher collected copies of the eight participants' blog diary entries. At three months post programme, the researcher received copies of all the participants' final 1,500-word assignments and the training institute's extensive final report. With data being gathered over a 10-month period, a longitudinal aspect was incorporated into the research. Ethical requirements specified by Liverpool University's Ethics Board were adhered to. All participants were individually informed, orally and in writing, of the scope of the research and given the right to refuse involvement or withdraw at any stage without prejudice to themselves, their role in the organisation, or their continued involvement

in the ELP. For reasons of anonymity, the specific sport, names of entities, and the stakeholders have not been mentioned. The participants are referred to by number and not by gender or culturally specific pseudonyms. Signed consent was given by all stakeholders, including the training institute, managers, and the participants to access organisational data, blog entries, final assignments, and the final report.

Data Analysis Procedures

Given that a case study takes a holistic view of phenomena, Thomas (2011, p. 170) suggested choosing a method of analysis that "explicitly frames our analysis in a holistic context" as a means of helping the thinking process see patterns and develop connections. Qualitative approaches tend to winnow the data and aggregate them into a limited number of themes on which to focus (Guest et al., 2012). These themes become the fundamental building blocks, the data to think with and use to interpret the meanings being constructed by the participants involved in the case. For this case study, a 6-phase thematic analysis developed and defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was systematically followed, as outlined below. It is a foundational method "for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data," which is compatible with "both essentialist and constructivist paradigms" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

The first phase involved reading and re-reading the entire data set for familiarisation and noting of initial ideas. Then the data were read again, and notes made of interesting features pertaining to the research question or the theme of TL. Review of those data extracts elicited the initial codes, which were transferred to a mind-map. As required by the third phase, all extracts related to those initial codes were sorted, clustered, and transcribed into potential thematic groups. The fourth stage consisted of further review to ensure each extract related to the theme to which it had been assigned and was retained, reassigned, or discarded accordingly. A thematic mind-map was generated. The fifth stage concentrated on refining the individual themes, generating clear titles, and creating a logical way of fulfilling the sixth stage of telling the story the analysis revealed.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of this case study identified 11 factors which, when present, fostered TL experiences or, in their absence, hindered the occurrence of TL experiences. For TL to occur, the basic core elements of group dialogue, critical reflection, and individual experience need to be present and a general awareness of context considered. Further, Taylor and Jarecke (2011) outlined several principles which, when placed in relation to those core elements, create opportunities for fostering TL in an educational setting. Therefore, the 11 identified factors will be briefly discussed through the lens of the basic core elements and the principles outlined by Taylor and Jarecke while also taking context into consideration. Recommendations are made when relevant.

Identification of Stakeholder Expectations

A theme raised by all stakeholders was the absence of consultation as to their needs or wants, leaving most with broad and vague expectations and a wait-and-see viewpoint as to whether the programme would be a relevant use of their time or have practical application to the organisation.

> *Interviewee: I hope this will give me something, add something to my personality.*
>
> *Interviewer: Something specific?*
>
> *Interviewee: Anything. (Pre-Interview, Participant 6)*

> *I want to improve myself from any parts, from any course. I want now to improve everything. (Pre-Interview, Participant 8)*

The art of leadership development involves "crafting each employee's expectations so that each is encouraged to deploy and hone his or her natural talents" (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001, p. 22). Not crafting their expectations left a vacuum that influenced the participants' initial attitude and expectations and a fatalistic "hope for the best" attitude. Such expectations are not purposeful and lack the heuristic quality of openly seeking possible answers or solutions to fulfil them (Taylor & Jarecke, 2011).

The ELP could have gained increased legitimacy by conducting a relevant needs assessment to separate needs from wants and ascertain whether those needs should be addressed through a leadership development programme or general skills training (Ciporen, 2008). This would have ensured "coherence between programme and organisation and between facilitator and participants" (Carroll & Nicholsen, 2014, p. 1418), resulting in greater management buy-in and long-term commitment.

A Respected Selection Process

Snyder (2008) suggested a gradual accumulation of insights as an acceptable approach to bring about changes in a person's views or habits. For the participants, that accumulation began when they were nominated to compete for selection into the ELP. They expressed pride, happiness, and increased confidence at being noticed as potentially key persons in their organisation. The evaluation process was made up of an online psychometric test, a 500-word, personal statement, an oral English test by telephone, an interview, and a 5-minute presentation to a panel of training institute representatives and organisational management.

The interview and presentation were viewed as the most valuable sections because they could not be cheated on and showed the candidates' real thoughts, experience, and calibre and not those of a paid writer, translator, editor, or telephone stand-in as was honestly spoken of regarding the other sections.

> *Why not? Nobody knows. I'm cheating myself also, for example. This can be. I know some people did it . . . but in the presentation, you are only the one . . . so it will be equal. (Pre-interview, Participant 7)*

The sense of accomplishment and attitude change came about because they closely aligned with Taylor and Jarecke's (2011) general principles and the essential core elements (Brock, 2010). There was a clear definition of what was expected and the tasks challenged their skills, stretched their imaginations, and made them aware of their own contexts, roles, and individual experience. Because they interviewed with, and presented to, the highest level of the organisational hierarchy, they were led to the edge of their comfort zones to confront power and argue their case.

There were doubts and questions raised regarding the rigor and validity of the selection process and concerns the nominations were not based on merit, character, loyalty, seniority, or contribution—nor were measured against accepted standards from a leadership competency model. Additionally, because it occurred too close to the start date of the ELP, it stressed the participants and the managers spoke of having to choose candidates quickly, without enough information. This did not sit well in a culture that has a low tolerance of uncertainty (Bogdan et al., 2012; Hofstede, 1994).

In general, the selection process was not a good fit for this Qatari organisational context. It lessened the candidates' sense of accomplishment and confidence and did little to foster an inclusive, open,

transformative mind-set but, rather, created a negatively competitive one. This, according to their own statements, influenced some dishonest actions and did not encourage the participants' assumptions or expectations to be more open, reflective, and emotionally primed for change. These findings suggest there should be more focus on the role and competency of ELP candidates over an extended timeframe. A suitable inclusion might be a 180- or 360-degree appraisal, which would have the advantage of being a before-and-after resource for comparative purposes.

Appropriate English Levels

The results of the pre-programme English test indicated that the participants entered the ELP with a mix of lower to upper intermediate language skills. Andrade et al. stated "academic proficiency takes as long as seven years to acquire" (2014, p. 208), therefore, without extensive additional language study, it is doubtful the participants understood all the content, or its subtleties, within the ELP's lectures and tours. Several participants admitted struggling with the hours of high-level theoretical content, with their tutor's speed of delivery, and the different and confusing accents. As one manager pessimistically stated regarding his candidate:

So, it isn't just a case of spelling and grammar, right? (Pre-interview, Manager 3)

Low language levels impact higher education outcomes (Andrade et al., 2014) and, indeed, may have been one of the most inhibiting factors that prevented a larger number of TL occurrences. The easiest solution would have been to conduct the ELP in Arabic but, being seen taking such a programme in English from a high status college was a source of pride and empowerment for the participants and created high levels of cultural and linguistic capital (Lueg & Lueg, 2015).

Inclusion of Sufficiently Time-Framed, Designed, Pre-Programme Stage

The lack of a well-designed, time-framed, pre-programme stage emerged as a strong theme from the data. The information pack and brief outline of the blog and assignment requirements were deemed insufficient. Participants' cultural avoidance of uncertainty, unknowns, and risk was not addressed and became an inhibiting factor (Hofstede, 1994). As one manager noted, the entire pre-programme or preparation stage was missing. This lowered the pre-programme's stage perceived value and legitimacy.

The short time frame between selection and travel to the United Kingdom led to varying degrees of stress. Over and above the need to consider an 8-week work absence, there was the bureaucracy Arabs typically face when travelling, customs regarding family commitments and women travelling alone, and anxiety regarding the amount of travel and the English weather. While it is accepted that disorientation is an identifier of one possible phase of the TL experience, there should be a clear distinction made between a person experiencing disorientation and one experiencing undue stress. For the stages of TL to occur, it requires participants who are "willing to engage in self-exploration and self-experimentation" and a "safe environment where people can play with cognitions, emotions and behaviour" (Ciporen, 2008, p. 200).

Awareness of Participants' Professional/Cultural Context

The participants often experienced disconnection between what they were learning and their daily Qatari context; the programme was heavy on theoretical information and light on practical application, compounded by their skills not being mature or developed enough to mould it into their own context.

> *I saw the people who was working in the sport, it's totally their structure and their tradition, their society is totally different from here. We cannot take what they have. The economy there or the people there, the style of their life assist to go through their planning, their strategy, so for that they succeed. Maximum, we can take two or three percent from their system to work here in Doha. (Post-interview, Participant 7)*

They were looking for cut-and-paste solutions to their organisational issues and were, instead, given tools to build solutions with. At times they felt overwhelmed, frustrated, and overloaded with no safe and trusted context for self-reflection or critical assessment of assumptions (Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

Although participants need to be led to the edge and encouraged to engage with differences, Carroll and Nicholson (2014, p. 1418) stated that successful leadership programmes establish "legitimacy by ensuring coherence between programme and organisation and between facilitators and participants." When this does not exist, resistance can be the result. A balance needs to be found between being led to the edge—and feeling you are being pushed over into an abyss. Resistance or withdrawal are the natural result, which can be seen from the body language in numerous photographs of the group during lectures. The only exceptions were during the leadership module's theory and application sections, which were conducted by specialist tutors in an interactive learning style.

Gurdjian et al. (2014, p. 3) suggested explicitly tailoring "from-to paths" for participants using contextual awareness and individual, group, and organisational expectations. Analysis of this case study data and the ELP outcomes clearly show the advantages that could be gained by taking context into account alongside the traditionally accepted three core elements. For instance, the collective nature of the Qatari culture would suggest providing conditions for smaller increments of cognitive engagement and relevant dialogue and reflection, thereby more closely fulfilling the general principles for fostering transformations (Taylor & Jarecke, 2011). "Collective cultures are traditional cultures which respect tradition and resist sudden change, especially if it is imposed" (Al-Omari, 2008, p. 39).

Personal and Cultural Exchanges

As Qataris, used to a strong hierarchical, tribal society that takes account of a person's position, age, and experience, the participants were unanimously impressed by their tutors and any personal interactions were highly valued and sought out (Bogdan et al., 2012). Additionally, coming from a high context, predominantly oral and anecdotal, culture they appreciated hearing their tutors' stories of hands-on experience in the field of sports.

> *Dr [name] at the end he gave us some his personal experiences with all the [entities] in the world. (Blog entry, Participant 4)*

> *I think it was very important to sit longer time with these professors. I don't think it's about the student and the teacher. It's not. It's more about you need to start a conversation with them, talk to them . . . and I was insisting sometimes you know, to take even the break time to just go and chat with them. (Post-interview, Participant 2)*

Qatari culture puts emphasis on relationships, hospitality, and personally getting to know anyone they are working or dealing with (Al-Omari, 2008). The participants took note when opportunities for such contact occurred. They felt they were being paid respect, making them more open to listening and returning respect to those people and institutions. Such interactions were mentioned so positively it is recommended to include as many as is feasible in future ELPs.

> *I was surprised [by the] warm welcome and hospitality unprecedented where we [were] greeted by [the dignitary] at the entrance to the meeting room. (Blog entry, Participant 4)*

Autonomous Components

For all participants, it was empowering when they exerted self-will over their experience by requesting changes to the ELP content. This supports the proposal that transformations can be shared when a group collectively questions, reflects, and acts on conditions (Fullerton, 2010).

Two other autonomous instances stood out as positive contributions to the participants' experience. Firstly, two participants took it upon themselves to organise a visit to a major sporting event, giving an opportunity to see practical application of some aspects of classroom work. Secondly, one of the professors invited two participants to speak to one of his university classes. This had a profound, transformative impact on both. They felt great pride in being able to present their country and organisation and answer questions in a university setting. It required them to undertake a premise reflection on their country, culture, and their personal and organisational identity while overcoming personal limitations (Kitchenham, 2006).

> *Students started to ask different questions about lots of things. We were very open and doing our best to answer all of these questions . . . for me this was a unique experience to be in front of master's students from one of the top universities in the world. (Blog entry, Participant 3)*

Writing the individual blog was not viewed favourably. Blogs can be valuable tools to encourage critical thinking, decision-making, and independent action, which can foster rather than hinder TL (Dalgarno et al., 2015). However, on this ELP, the participants viewed it as a time-consuming burden that added little value. The principal problems may have been the lack of understanding of the value of the blog to reflect and gain a deeper understanding of the ELP, and its limited readership and feedback (Dalgarno et al., 2015).

> *I didn't understand why. . . . It's like agenda. . . . We wake up at nine o'clock, we went to blah, blah, blah and we blah, blah. (Post-interview, Participant 7)*

For adults used to managing others, becoming students with little input or control caused some frustration leading to resistance and withdrawal. This could have been mitigated by activities deemed more relevant to the individuals' roles, and facilitating an opportunity for participants to present or teach an aspect of their cultural or organisational context to others. This would require powerful use of premise reflection and imagination and induce ownership of a true lived experience, all of which have been identified as transformative factors (Brock, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Jarecke, 2011).

Acceptable Levels and Balance of Travel, Stress, Uncertainty, and Course Intensity

This ELP included extensive travel and multiple visits to sporting venues and points of interest. Although Morgan (2011, p. 247) stated that travel "represents a potentially fruitful vehicle for transformative education and learning," there is a vast difference between actual physical movement and psychological movement or growth. While interaction with different cultures rates highly to facilitate a worldview transformation, forms of mass tourism and spending long hours in buses did not. They became a resented and resisted manifestation of the misalignment of the programme to their expectations and the lack of control they felt over their lived experience (Carroll & Nicholson, 2014).

> *Too much travel, for nothing. For the same, you travel to other cities. It was the same, the same. (Post-interview, Participant 5)*

The stress and frustration were compounded by their confusion about how to implement what they were experiencing into their own culture and context. Although we need "to live with some discomfort on the edge of knowing, in the process of gaining new insights and understandings" (Taylor, 2007, p. 187), there should be a balance between discomfort and stress. When participants feel they are too often balancing "on the edge," it may begin to feel more like balancing on a knife's edge: potentially painful and damaging. It is more beneficial to engage, challenge, and stretch participants at the limit of their comfort zones within an environment where they feel safe enough to play with their emotions, behaviour, and frames of reference (Ciporen, 2008).

Small changes could have brought about a reduction in stress and more balance—such as some access to, or chance to share, their own culture, food or context; to return hospitality; a shortened programme, or some parts conducted in Qatar, allowing time for reflection, assimilation, practical application, feedback, and more on-going support.

Inclusion of a Designed and Implemented Post-Programme Stage

Their final assignments and interviews showed evidence the participants were drawing on concepts and learning gained in the ELP. A change in their mind-set or worldview had occurred and they took this revelation seriously by undertaking personal changes in their interactions that were noticeable to their managers and peers.

> *If he sees that I'm overworked, he'll always walk into the office, ask me, "How's everything going, man? Is everything OK? Can I do anything for you?"—which he never did before. It shows you that now he's more self-aware or more aware of other people, which is something that I think most employers strive to pull out of their employees. (Post-interview, Manager 3)*

However, TL is defined as "any type of learning that has a lasting impact on how individuals interact with others, frame problems and view themselves" (Ciporen, 2010, p. 177). Most of the participants did return to their organisation with new feelings of accountability and a desire to give back to their organisation. First and foremost, they expected to be looked upon as leaders and challenged to put their new skills and concepts into action. But while keen to share, rather than hoard prestigious knowledge (De Atkine, 1999), no participant was invited to present or disseminate any feedback, information, or reports to their departments or peers. No assignment projects were undertaken and managers claimed to have not seen their participants' final assignments or the institute's final report.

> *I want to do something, what can I do? There is nothing handed to me to do. There is nothing the project they give it to me so I can lead. There is nothing. Just I took the course, I just come, sit in the office. Okay, what is your plan? (Post-interview, Participant 7)*

Of the 10 stages of the TL process, the data suggest Points 1 to 7 being fostered within the ELP, but no indications of Points 8 to 10. Therefore, provisionally trying on the new roles, then building competence, self-confidence, and relationships in them and finally reintegrating that role into their life based on new perspectives were not brought to maturity (Mezirow, 2011). Bushell and Goto (2011, p. 1249) pointed out that the after-programme environment is important "to continue the transformation process, particularly exploring ways to build on their personal growth and to put into practice the leadership skills and strategies focusing on sustainable development in their own society." Longitudinal studies support that in college graduates, at least, the last stage of "contextual knowing",

"rarely occurs until after graduation" but rather takes place in the subsequent work and organisational life (Brock, 2010, p. 124). The post-programme stage was devoid of further fostering.

> *It absolutely is all about follow-up and it's about keeping certain key messages top of mind. You gradually just forget things. It's like a dream. . . . If you don't remind people or give people actions in their daily life to try, then it's just simply going to be lost. (Post-interview, Manager 3)*

A second 360-degree feedback would have been beneficial as a critical reflection on their post-ELP status as leaders and to show how deep, transformational and lasting any changes were (Chappelow, 2004). Opportunities to disseminate aspects of the ELP and implement one of their assignments for organisational change would have been supportive in bringing to maturity the full cycle of the TL experience as outlined by Mezirow (2011) and giving them necessary validation in the eyes of their peers, subordinates, and managers.

Cognitive Skills and Educational Level Appropriate for Content

The research data strongly suggest a misalignment between the rigour of the ELP content and the skill set of several participants, which were not developed enough to cope with such a massive input of new concepts and models in order to assimilate or manipulate them into their own experience or context. At times, the participants felt frustrated, overloaded, and overwhelmed—which went well beyond a sense of disorientation and led to alienation, avoidance, and withdrawal (Weinberg et al., 2010).

Although tools and models are part of best practice in leadership programmes, for participants who are already at their cognitive limits, the number used should be reduced to those best suited to the organisational context the participants will be attempting to apply them in. A smaller selection, reviewed in greater depth, with time for examples, case study exercises, critical reflection, and group dialogue would have been of more benefit.

A Group Dynamic

The group proved to be of real importance by producing a stabilising effect and enhancing the participants' lived experiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of TL.

> *We helped each other . . . we supported each other. (Post-interview, Participant 5)*

> *I discovered these people. (Post-interview, Participant 7)*

Facilitating a transformative group experience should not be left to chance. Every opportunity should be afforded at pre-, implementation, and post stages for participants to form a strong, supportive dynamic. During the ELP, the participants described their cohesion into a group as "discovering each other" and indeed, our need for membership of a group becomes stronger when faced with extreme situations that threaten our personal identity or performance (Lewis, 2009).

It is essential to find a balance between creating inclusive engagement with group dialogue and problem solving, where each person's experiences are valued, with the individual also being encouraged towards autonomous, critical thinking, and reflection (Mezirow, 1997). This balance is necessary to avoid the group taking on the collective need and then building a fortress against any change in the group view (Lewis, 2009).

Conclusion

Transformative capacity can be understood as the ability to turn transformative potential into transformative impact (Strasser et al., 2019). This case study produced new insights into 11, previously unresearched, key factors which, when present, have the potential to foster a TL experience and, when absent, can hinder a TL experience within the Qatari organisational context.

It could be argued it is not possible to generalise from an individual case and therefore this research makes limited valid scientific contribution, but that also holds true for a single experiment. This case study did not set out to make statistical generalisations but, rather, to expand and generalise on a theory, which it lays claim to accomplishing by focusing on a unique, real-life situation and revealing a multitude of details.

It suggests there first needs to be an opportunity for genuine, lived experiences and safe spaces for individuals to use the core elements associated with TL to progress, in their own way, through the phases of a TL experience. Additionally, it reinforces previous research that claims there are general principles that, when applied in a traditional educational setting, can increase the likelihood of a legitimate, transformative experience. However, the main conclusion to be drawn from this research is that it is not enough to design and implement an academically sound ELP and leave TL to chance. When an organisation sends participants on an ELP, all involved stakeholders have a shared responsibility to create the optimal conditions for legitimate, purposeful experiences. This means buy-in and support during all stages. Sufficient time, and the development of pre- and post-programme activities, should not be considered as extras to the programme but as integral, equally important stages that will affect both the ELP and its TL outcomes.

This case study highlights that by being more aware of key success factors, taking into consideration the cultural and organisational context, using some general principles, and creating opportunities to challenge in a realistic way, legitimate transformative experiences can occur in a Qatari organisational context and thereby contribute to developing the future leaders Qatar needs to realise its vision.

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