

Exploring the learnings derived from catalytic experiences in a leadership context

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Orientation: Personal leadership comprises self-awareness, authenticity, inspiration and passion. The concept of personal leadership was explored together with its relationship with leadership-related learnings derived from a catalytic experience.

Research purpose: The objective of the study was to explore the leadership-related learnings derived from a catalytic experience and any connection between these learnings, personal leadership and leadership in an organisational context.

Motivation for the study: Measurement of leaders' performance remains largely focused on the results achieved. The importance of personal leadership in the corporate environment is often ignored and even questioned. Recognising that there is a relationship between personal leadership and professional leadership enables leaders to connect who they are being and what they are doing. This can enhance their leadership.

Research design, approach and method: The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically narrative enquiry. The sample comprised seven leaders who have had catalytic experiences in their lives. In-depth interviews were conducted and thematic analysis was used to identify themes on the leadership-related learnings gained from the leaders' catalytic experiences.

Main findings: Elements of personal leadership and the processes involved in the development of personal leadership were identified. It was furthermore shown that challenging experiences serve as learning opportunities and that time for reflection is essential in this learning process.

Practical/managerial implications: Leadership lessons are best learnt through experience. Using challenging experiences as learning opportunities may assist leaders in their growth and development.

Contribution: Leadership effectiveness and organisational effectiveness may be enhanced by a more holistic view of leadership that includes elements of personal leadership.

Introduction

Leadership is complex and cannot be bound by a single definition. Definitions of leadership include references to influence, inspiration and action and yet leadership is generated from within (Cashman, 2008). This is referred to as personal leadership (Hirzel, 2004). Personal leadership comprises self-awareness, authenticity, inspiration and passion. It refers to the characteristics unique to the individual and encompasses the 'being' aspects of leadership. Professional leadership refers to the characteristics associated with the individual's role in the organisation, thus encompassing the 'doing' aspects of leadership. The former resides within each leader; it is this concept that the study explores on a deeper level together with the relationship between personal leadership and leadership-related learnings derived from a catalytic or life-changing experience that alters the individual's self-concept.

Purpose

Leaders are often identified by what they do and the results they achieve. Cashman (2008, p. 22) is of the opinion that 'we tend to view leadership as an external event. We only see it as something that we do'. However, it is increasingly recognised that this external view of leadership is not enough to understand the full picture. Leadership competencies, skills and actions are often researched in relation to leadership excellence and there is a lack of recognition of the significance of personal leadership as a valued aspect of leadership within organisations (Badarocco, 1998; Cashman, 2008; Smith, 2009). The present study aimed to address this apparent lack of attention to this essential component of leadership. Organisations would benefit from shifting their focus to personal leadership aspects such as personal characteristics that are crucial for leadership, personal mastery, self-awareness and personal growth (Badarocco, 1998; Cashman, 2008;

Harle, 2005). Leaders could be helped to understand that there is a natural progression from personal leadership to interpersonal leadership through to professional leadership (Smith, 2009; Verrier & Smith, 2005), which establishes the connection for leaders between who they are and what they are doing in order to enhance their leadership.

The study furthermore approached the topic from a unique point of view by exploring the life experiences contributing to personal growth in a leadership context. It thus expands the research in this field. Leadership and personal development are inseparable; leadership is an 'intimate expression of who we are' (Cashman, 2008, p. 22). This encompasses the personal characteristics of leaders that drive what they do and thus drive their tangible outcomes. Personal leadership refers to the qualities and characteristics of leadership that are unique to that leader. Leaders who develop their personal leadership profile through a process of self-awareness and continue to evolve their profile by revisiting it regularly are more likely to be successful (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2007). Our experiences in life shape who we are and how we behave in various situations. Integrating these experiences in order to create a meaningful context that is unique to the individual underlies the development of personal leadership. Cashman (2008, p. 34) supports the view that 'personal mastery involves appreciating the rich mixture of our life experiences and how they dynamically form our unique existence'. Self-awareness is often enhanced through personal experiences and challenges. The assumption underlying this study was that if people can take their life experiences and derive learning from them, then they are likely to create something more meaningful in their lives as a result of these experiences. This idea was extrapolated to include learnings related to personal leadership in an organisational context (Horowitz, 2012). The personal growth experiences were specified as catalytic experiences. This assumption served as guideline in forming the research question and in designing the study.

The core research question was: 'What are the learnings gained from a catalytic experience and how do these learnings relate to leadership in an organisational context?' The research objectives were to (1) describe the learnings from the catalytic experiences, (2) identify the relationships between the learnings, personal leadership and leadership in an organisational context and (3) distil guidelines or recommendations for leadership development in organisations.

Literature review

Catalytic experiences

The literature does not refer to catalytic experiences per se but rather mentions turning points (Gerus & Brydges, 2006; McAdams, 2006), defining moments (Badarocco, 1997), crucible moments (Bennis & Thomas, 2002) and life-changing events (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). The choice of the term *catalytic experience* for the purpose of this study was based on a desire to indicate that this is an experience that forms a catalyst in an individual's life so that the individual

is personally transformed as a result of it. A shift is created in the individual's level of self-awareness and in how they define themselves on a being level going forward. Catalytic experiences shape, transform or catalyse an individual to do something different, think differently or be different.

McGraw (2002) identifies some themes relating to defining moments. A defining moment is an experience or event that shapes a person's self-concept so that they are changed in some way. The experience may be positive or negative. The significance of a defining moment is determined by the person who experienced the moment, regardless of how trivial the same experience may be to someone else. These defining moments affect self-concept so that the latter is altered for an individual's remaining lifetime. Once an individual experiences this, there is a shift that could be permanent and the results put the individual on an entirely different path of action, behaviour and achievement. Finally, an individual may experience more than one defining moment in their life and each one is significant in terms of the learnings drawn from it.

Personal leadership

There is a large diversity in terms of the definitions of 'lead' and 'leader' (Allen, 1990). Nicholls (1988) suggests that we embrace the diversity in definitions of leadership rather than continually search for the one definition that satisfies all views. A common thread in the literature is the word influence. The way leaders influence has evolved over time and there has been a shift in leadership theories from task orientation and transactional leadership to people orientation and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Cengage, 2006). Servant leadership has taken the evolution a step further by focusing on being of service (Stone & Patterson, 2005). Throughout the process of evolution, leadership qualities have also evolved from a focus on what the leader does to who the leader is. This is referred to as an inside-out approach to leadership, emphasised by personal leadership (Cashman, 2008).

Four leadership frameworks that include the concept of personal leadership have emerged from transformational leadership theory and servant leadership theory. Each has a slightly different interpretation of personal leadership, but they all include the significance of personal mastery and self-awareness in a leadership context. Smith (2009) identifies three categories of leadership, namely professional leadership, interpersonal leadership and personal leadership. Personal leadership relates to aspects of personal mastery and meaning and comprises four inner life dimensions, namely spiritual, physical, mental and emotional dimensions. Interpersonal leadership is defined as the study of relationships and relationship building and includes the social life dimension, whilst professional leadership refers to the importance of work and includes the three outer life dimensions, namely financial, career and ecological dimensions. Both interpersonal and professional leadership develop from personal leadership through personal growth and personal mastery.

Cashman's (2008) 'leadership from the inside out' looks at two aspects of leadership: inner and outer leadership. Inner leadership refers to personal leadership and considers the 'being' of leadership together with having a sense of meaning. Personal leadership is achieved through personal mastery, the latter requiring a process of growth. Authenticity is regarded as the basis for personal mastery and the most important, yet challenging leadership principle. Outer leadership relates to the 'doing' of leadership and interpersonal relationships.

Covey's (2004) whole person approach to leadership describes leadership in terms of two broad categories, namely character and competence. Character refers to personal leadership and self-awareness whereas competence refers to performance. Essential character traits are integrity (sense of commitment to oneself and others), maturity (balance between courage and consideration) and an abundance mentality (a mindset of 'there is plenty for everybody'). These are the components of personal mastery and hence personal leadership.

The final leadership framework considered was Senge's (1990) servant leadership. This framework does not exclude the need to perform as a leader, but it specifically seeks to explore the 'being' aspects of personal leadership. Senge (1990) emphasises the development of personal mastery as a lifelong learning process.

The preceding theories emphasise personal mastery as a foundation for personal leadership. Personal mastery is the process that allows leaders to build themselves from the inside out. This means paying conscious attention to who we are being as leaders, through self-awareness, and realising that this is as important as what we are doing as leaders (Cashman, 2008). By knowing ourselves more deeply, we can begin to manage our behaviours, emotions and expressions (Goleman, 2004).

The relationship between catalytic experiences and personal leadership

There is a body of research on leadership styles related to the personal leadership concept such as transformational leadership and servant leadership. These studies are mainly quantitative and show support for a relationship between personal characteristics (including self-efficacy and emotional intelligence) and leadership styles (Pillay, Viviers & Mayer, 2013; Ramchunder & Martins, 2014). The latter in turn was related to various desired outcomes such as organisational commitment, team commitment and team effectiveness and the job satisfaction and performance of subordinates (Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2013; McLaggan, Bezuidenhout & Botha, 2013; Mokgolo, Mokgolo & Modiba, 2012). There is, however, a dearth of qualitative studies in this field (Beaty, Nkomo & Kriek, 2006) and specifically studies related to the development of the characteristics associated with personal leadership. Shannon and Van Dam (2013) discuss a leadership development programme that seems to centre on professional and interpersonal leadership concepts (as defined earlier in the present article). A personal leadership theme is, however, also included and a qualitative analysis

of the effect of the programme indicated that confidence and self-efficacy were, amongst others, outcomes of the programme.

The present study specifically considered the role of significant experiences in leadership development. George (2007) studied what can be termed as successful leaders and identifies the important contribution of their unique life stories to their motivation and success. Bennis and Thomas (2002) and McAdams (2006) also emphasise the catalytic role of experience in developing effective leadership qualities. Those participants who were able to create meaning from significant experiences were able to engage with their leadership role and saw themselves as capable of shaping a future based on what they have learned. Attributing meaning is often as a result of reflection on the experience. It can be suggested that in the organisational context, characterised by a continuous need for transformation, change in itself would act as a catalyst. Geldenhuys and Veldsman (2011, p. 1) refer to the 'hyper turbulent context' in which organisations function. Leadership plays an important role in such an environment (Eustace & Martins, 2014) and De Jager, Cilliers and Veldsman (2003) refer to the need to develop change leaders.

A catalytic experience generates a process in an individual. The self-concept is re-examined and perceptions of reality up to that point are questioned. Emerging from such an experience with a sense of learning, strength and growth empowers people from a life and leadership perspective (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). A catalytic experience generates a new level of awareness within an individual that starts a journey of self-discovery.

Badarocco (1998) applies this idea to leadership by creating the link between a defining moment and self-awareness. Three questions result from a catalytic experience: Who am I? Who are we? Who is the organisation? Asking these questions enhances the leader's understanding of the impact of the defining moment on their level of self-awareness and therefore on their personal leadership. This leads to more effective leadership. These questions solidify a sense of self-awareness that may not have been there before the experience of the defining moment. In the hero's journey, as depicted by Greenleaf (1977), the hero embarks on a journey and along the way he battles challenges and obstacles, defeats the dragon and returns home transformed. This story is used as a metaphor for the journeys of self-discovery that most people can identify themselves as having gone through at some point in their life.

In Figure 1 the authors propose a model to illustrate the development process as described in the literature. A catalytic experience is shown as one way in which self-awareness can be created and meaning enhanced. Both self-awareness and meaning in turn contribute to personal mastery and thus to personal leadership. The latter is defined in terms of the theories as previously discussed. This model served as basis for the research methodology but at the same

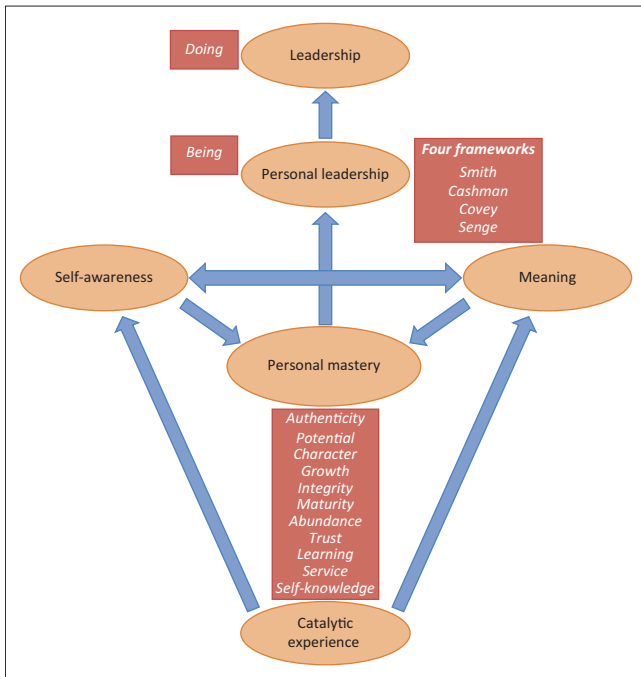


FIGURE 1: The literature review journey.

time the findings of the present study could provide support for this model. Furthermore, the leadership theories served as interpretive framework for the findings but the authors remained open to any new themes that might emerge or novel ways in which themes might emerge.

Method

A qualitative approach using narrative inquiry was followed in the present study. The aim was to explore leaders' stories of their catalytic experiences in order to understand the leadership-related learnings gained from these experiences.

Sample

The first author has a coaching practice that specialises in leadership development in the corporate environment. Business contacts and present and past clients were contacted for referrals to leaders who could serve as potential research participants. This is consistent with snowball sampling or chain-reference sampling (E.M. Schurink, 1998). Present coaching relationships may have affected objectivity during the interview and it was decided not to use the current client base of leaders as participants for the research, but only as an access point to other leaders that could become research participants. Past clients that had completed the coaching relationship at least two years prior to the start of the study were considered as potential research participants. Participation in all cases remained voluntary. Once leaders were identified as potential research participants, they were contacted directly via email to explain the nature of the research and to determine whether the leaders had in fact had a catalytic experience that they felt comfortable speaking about. Leaders further had to hold a senior position in a corporate environment. This choice was based on the level of complexity that leadership in these positions requires. This is

TABLE 1: Demographic data.

Gender	Industry	Title	Organisation size†	Years in leadership
Male	Automotive	General manager	Large	1–5
Male	Consulting	Managing director	Small	6–10
Male	Financial services	Managing director	Medium	1–5
Female	Financial services	Divisional head	Large	10+
Male	Consulting	Managing director	Medium	10+
Female	Automotive	General manager	Medium	6–10
Male	Financial services	Chief Executive Officer	Medium	6–10

†, small, less than 100 employees; medium, 100 to 500 employees; large, more than 500 employees.

in line with purposive sampling 'which is subjective since the researcher relies on his or her experience and judgment' (Guarte & Barrios, 2006, p. 277). The focus is on the exploration of the research question rather than representativeness in terms of a pre-specified population. This has implications for the generalisability of the results. Demographic data for the seven participants are given in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were contacted telephonically to set up an interview date. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the seven participants; the interviews were taped with their permission. Field notes were used together with the transcribed, recorded interviews and a reflective research journal to capture the data throughout the research process. Transcriptions and notes were stored in a manner that allowed access to the researchers only. When data are collected through in-depth interviews, the researcher influences what is reported and how it is reported (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Fourie & Van Eeden, 2010). The confessional tale style is used (Sparkes, 2002) and the findings are contextualised in terms of the research objectives and the research question (Poggenpoel, 1998). The results of the thematic analysis of the participants' reflections on the catalytic experiences were reported together with the researcher's interpretation of the leadership-related learnings derived from these experiences. In accordance with the informed, written consent given by the participants, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured in the manner in which the data were captured, stored, retrieved and thereafter utilised in the final write-up. The interviews were private, data were safely stored and no identifying information was published.

Data collection technique

Narrative enquiry reflects an interest in the biographical story as narrated by the person living it. Chase (2005, p. 653) defines the actual narrative as 'oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview or a naturally occurring conversation'. Each in-depth interview began with a definition by the interviewer of a catalytic experience. The catalytic experience may be one event or more, it could be positive or negative and personal or work-related experiences could be shared. From that point, the leaders were requested to share their stories in the manner that they found most comfortable. The focus was on the

description of the catalytic experience, the personal growth resulting from it and the learnings derived in a leadership context. It was left up to the participants to share their stories in any way that they wished and they could choose to tell their life story or a specific incident within it. The interviewer limited the guidance and direction given in terms of the manner in which participants told their story resulting in narratives (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2008). The life story of participants was regarded in terms of its relevance to the goals of this research; the aim was not to understand their full biographical history (Plummer, 2001). The interview ended with a check of the interview guide to ensure that the salient focus areas mentioned above were covered. The guide contained six broad questions (e.g. what have you learnt about yourself in the context of being a leader? What are the factors arising from the experience that have shaped your learning?), but these were only asked if a focus area was not already discussed by the participant.

Data analysis strategy

The transcripts of the taped interviews were re-read numerous times to make sense of the stories, to identify patterns and relationships and to draw out emerging themes. This is recommended when narrative material is involved (W. Schurink, 2009). A variation on Tesch's approach, as described by Poggenpoel (1998), was utilised, resulting in the identification of a number of main themes and subthemes on leadership-related learnings gained from the catalytic experiences. Each narrative was read to form an idea of the nature of the catalytic experience and the learnings derived from the experience. A list of these learnings was compiled for each narrative. Thereafter similar topics were clustered together across the interviews, resulting in main themes and subthemes.

The data collection, recording and analysis supported the reliability of the inferences drawn from the data (e.g. recording and transcribing the interviews). The research context and process were described in detail to determine the degree of similarity with other contexts (and thus the transferability of the findings) and to enable replication of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2005). The results can only be generalised to another context if this context is similar in terms of the sample (amongst other elements) as described in the present study. Future replication of the study would require a process similar to that described here (also see Horowitz, 2012).

Findings

The participants described catalytic experiences that occurred over time (e.g. working for an abusive manager) or focused on specific catalytic experiences (e.g. a move to another country or the birth of a child). The types of experiences varied and were related to work, health, political influences, financial circumstances and personal circumstances. Although the majority of the experiences were described in terms such as 'challenging' or 'traumatic', there

TABLE 2: Themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subtheme
The 'doing' of leadership	Vision
	Taking responsibility
	Drive and hard work
The 'being' of leadership	Character
	Self-awareness
	Self-development
Interpersonal relationships	Communication and building relationships
	Developing people
Meaning and purpose	-

were experiences that were seen as positive. It is, however, important to note that the catalytic experiences described by the participants were highly individualised and the focus is not on the experiences per se, but on the common themes in terms of leadership learnings that could be identified. The themes and subthemes that were identified are summarised in Table 2.

These themes are illustrated below and in each instance reference is also made to the catalytic experience or experiences that an individual experienced. It is, however, important to note that the attribution of the leadership learnings to these events was already made by the participants themselves and the aim of the thematic analysis was the categorisation of the learnings.

The 'doing' of leadership

An important aspect of a leader's role is reflected in performance or action. This is a feature of the leader's role that is considered to be more tangible and therefore measurable. In the findings of the present study, this aspect was identified as the theme relating to the 'doing' of leadership. When the leaders in the study were asked to think about their catalytic experiences, they focused on what they do as leaders and how they could link their leadership actions to their catalytic experiences. One such area of focus was creating and following a vision. A second area of focus dealt with taking responsibility and a third with drive and hard work. These three focus areas formed the subthemes for the main theme: the 'doing' of leadership.

Considering the first subtheme, vision, it was referred to by some leaders as 'big picture thinking', 'goals' and 'objectives'. Most leaders believed that an important part of their leadership-related learnings comprised clarity on what their vision is, communicating this vision and bringing people along to achieve it. Part of their leadership role is to direct people and guide them towards an important outcome for the business. In the words of Leader 6, 'I now carry the company's vision and say "Guys, this is the vision". I get passionate about it and in that moment, I believe it'. This leader regarded various events as significant in terms of personal growth and development as a leader. These included working overseas and being exposed to an environment where excellence is valued. Interestingly, Leader 4 struggled to define her work role until coaching helped her to realise

that a personal vision is as important as a company vision: 'at the same time [*creating*] a vision for myself'.

From the leaders' stories about the catalytic experiences it became clear that these experiences resulted in an inclination to take responsibility (the second subtheme). Leader 5 spoke about having a 'valence' to step into a crisis and sort it out, creating order from the chaos. This leader explained that valence is a psychological term for a predisposition within one's self. It is a natural, instinctive response. Leader 5 felt that his valence stemmed from the first time he took responsibility in a crisis as expressed in his retelling of a financial crisis that he regarded as a catalytic experience. This leader said:

'My valence would be to move in whenever there is a crisis. Now I get triggered unconsciously because I've got a subconscious need ... that attracts that stuff in me'.

Responsibility as a leader includes the importance of letting go, delegating or not holding on to too much, taking responsibility for actions without blaming others, having an influence over people and making tough decisions. In the words of Leader 3, 'you can't be a good strong leader without making some tough strong decisions along the way'.

Every leader interviewed for the study spoke about drive, ambition, excellence and hard work as essential components of their leadership. This was the basis for the third subtheme in this category. Some of the terms used to describe this sense of drive were: ambition, commitment, focusing on one thing and getting good at it, moving forward without letting the negatives derail from goals, being a perfectionist, requiring a high quality of delivery from themselves and their staff, working late hours and focusing on the things that they can change or influence more than the things that are outside of their control. 'Taking action' and 'moving forward' were concepts that appeared repeatedly in the leaders' reflections on their learnings from their catalytic experiences. Leader 5 expressed the element of perfectionism as 'everything I do is 100%'. This is closely related to the concept of leading by example and the participants believed that the best way that they could teach others to be leaders is to show leadership through their own actions and by setting an example that others would want to follow. Leader 1 expressed this as 'walking the talk'. In reaction to experiences related to the political situation in South Africa, he decided to learn to lead rather than assuming the role of victim.

The 'being' of leadership

The second theme identified in the study related to the 'being' aspects of leadership. This theme was identified in the literature as aspects relating to personal leadership. When leaders ask themselves 'Who are we as leaders?' aspects relating to personal leadership or 'being' help them to come up with answers. The subthemes identified within this theme relate to character, self-awareness and personal development.

Leader 1 gave much thought to how character is shaped. He told the story of a sculptor who would spend hours gazing at a rock before beginning to sculpt. When asked why he did this, the sculptor responded that he needed to spend time looking at the elephant that is already in the rock. Only when he has the picture clearly in his mind, can he just chip away what is not necessary from the elephant. It has already been mentioned how Leader 1 decided to use his politically related experiences in a constructive manner and in the case of Leader 3 a destructive relationship with a superior taught him what to avoid in his own leadership style.

Essential leadership qualities were identified by the leaders, as follows:

- Humility in terms of ability to admit mistakes.
- Integrity relating to honesty and 'walking the talk'.
- Authenticity, which they reflected on as understanding who they are and being comfortable with themselves.
- Resilience in terms of withstanding hardship, not letting the negatives derail you and persevering through these.
- Courage to do the right things, make the sometimes tough decisions and to be a survivor.
- Charisma, which was also referred to as energy and passion.
- 'Trusting your gut'.
- Having patience and being calm.

The second subtheme that emerged from the study was that of self-awareness. Self-awareness is essential to answer the question 'Who am I as a leader?' Every leader spoke about self-awareness as being key to leadership-related learnings from their catalytic experiences. Understanding weaknesses and being aware of areas of strength are crucial aspects of being self-aware. As a result of their catalytic experiences, participants felt that they became more aware of their own and others' emotions. They also became more caring about how others feel and were able to express how they feel more easily than before. These traits resemble the concept of emotional intelligence which is considered a crucial leadership skill (Goleman, 2004). Leader 7 explained: 'You start wanting to know more about psychology, ... and get a lot of that EQ involved because previously I really wasn't like that'. A successful business gave him a sense of achievement but eventually resulted in an experience of burnout.

Self-containment or managing their own self by maintaining boundaries and not losing their sense of identity through their work was highlighted as being critical to leadership. Leader 7 stated it simply as:

'I am who I am ... I've completely redefined myself in terms of my identity so my identity is no longer work ... that mirror that gets held up when you just look at yourself'.

In this case the birth of a child served as the catalyst. Leader 4 experienced a coaching process as enabling her to separate her personal identity from her role at work. The latter became her primary identity due to personal problems including a handicapped child and the family's financial circumstances.

A common theme for the leaders was that of continuing their personal journey of self-exploration and reflection. They identified this as necessary in order to remain 'okay' even through some tough experiences. Leader 1 described this as follows: 'You lead through self. You've got to live it and become it'. Leader 2 referred to his personal journey as 'an understanding of where I can take myself personally to a completely new level'. Despite having had a difficult childhood, there were at various stages in his life mentors who saw his potential and helped him in developing this potential. Several leaders also brought up the personal reflection space and its importance in self-awareness.

The third subtheme was that of self-development. Self-development was seen to include all aspects of learning and growth. Learning was described by some as a curiosity to learn more about how their business works, through reading, experience or observation of other leaders. The ability to see things from a different perspective followed from the catalytic experiences together with an appreciation for new experiences. As Leader 6 stated, 'as a leader you need to go out and get experience. Don't be scared to do new stuff'. Various events in her life (amongst others resolving issues related to her sexual identity and the deaths of people close to her) created an awareness of her need to express her own individuality in how she lives. As Leader 5 put it:

'I also believe that a good education is important. So development of skills is important irrespective of the adversity or challenges you face as is providing opportunities for people to develop themselves'.

Despite the financial crisis in his life, he continued his studies at university. Growth in this theme is closely linked to learning. Leader 2 expressed this as follows:

'I've always looked to those other people that can teach you, so for me it's your environment as a great teacher and the people environment ... and hopefully that is the culture we start creating more and more in the business'.

The role mentors played in his life has already been referred to.

Interpersonal relationships

The third theme identified in the findings was the theme of interpersonal relationships. A leader achieves results mainly through the contribution of the people who work for them. Therefore, interpersonal relationships become a crucial aspect of fulfilling a leadership role. The two subthemes identified in this theme were effective communication and developing people.

Effective communication is characterised by openness and honesty. Listening and questioning emerged from the leaders' responses as a required leadership skill. The importance of regular feedback also emerged from the catalytic experiences. Leader 4 stated that 'the one thing I learnt out of my experience was to give feedback. So get feedback and give feedback'. She found herself in a position at work where

the expectations were not clearly defined resulting in feelings of incompetence. Effective communication is a prerequisite for building relationships. Leaders specifically mentioned trust, being inclusive, connecting with people, being part of a team and managing conflict as aspects that enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships. All these are facilitated by effective communication. Some leaders saw that in order to achieve their objectives as leaders, they needed to bring people along rather than tell them what to do. In the words of Leader 1, 'leadership is about relationships'. It is furthermore critical for leaders to embrace diversity and be open in relating to different kinds of people and ways of thinking. Leader 6 emphasised this by stating that 'you had to learn to communicate across diversity'. Again, her overseas experiences are reflected in this learning.

Participants also identified developing people as a core component of the leadership role and this is the second subtheme in the theme of interpersonal relationships. When looking at the support element of developing people, leaders reflected on the importance of a genuinely caring approach to people, showing support for your staff when they are battling with their work and treating them well. Leader 6 referred to the need to take the time to teach her staff by showing support and patience: 'Why do we have so much patience with children but none with adults?'. However, there has to be a balance between supporting and challenging others. The need to challenge people in order to encourage their growth implies that people have to be stretched in order for them to be stimulated to fulfil their potential. Developing people was associated with transformation, career development and ensuring that staff is encouraged to fulfil their potential. As Leader 2 said:

'My intent is to grow and develop people primarily ... I can challenge people and push them hard for their own good ... But I think in the essence I can see other people experience that and that empathy is there'.

Upon reflecting on what helped the leaders to grow and develop in their own careers, they found that having a mentor or role model helped significantly to move them further in their careers. Some actively sought out mentors to look up to and learn from and continue to do so. In the words of Leader 2:

'I think the other very important thing for me is that I've always had role models and I have always have had people that I've looked up to ... and had the ability to form relationships with people who have wanted to mentor me'.

Leader 7 expressed a desire to mentor others so that they can benefit from a mentoring relationship the way that he had benefited, by stating his intention as follows: 'I want to be a mentor and I want to guide this person in their personal growth'.

Meaning and purpose

The fourth theme identified in the study was that of meaning and purpose. Most of the leaders in telling their stories

referred to 'having a sense of purpose' or 'meaning'. All the leaders alluded to meaning and purpose either directly or indirectly. The leaders in the study either saw it as an integral part of their work as leaders or as a way of making a contribution outside of their work environment. For example, one leader described charity work that he gets involved in from a company perspective whereas another described the work that he does in drug rehabilitation which has no direct relationship to his career. The common theme for the leaders interviewed was that each leader described a sense of purpose through 'making a difference', having a 'cause', 'self-sacrifice' or attributing meaning to their life experiences.

The coaching process helped Leader 4 to realise she was responsible for improving the quality of her life: 'When you've got a fundamental values difference, then you've actually got to say, "Why are you here?"' Whereas the birth of a child forced Leader 7 to not just accept the feelings of burnout he was experiencing in his work but to redefine the meaning of his life: 'What am I on this earth for and how can I get more potential out of myself than really just for business?'

Having passion for your work and enjoying your leadership role were related to a sense of meaning and purpose. Leader 4 commented that 'if I'm passionate about something I'll give it my all to make it work'.

Discussion

The broad aim of this study was to explore the leadership-related learnings derived from a catalytic experience and any connection between these learnings, personal leadership and leadership in an organisational context. The study contributes by showing the value of a more holistic approach that emphasises the importance of personal leadership in leadership selection and development. The findings form the basis for recommendations on interventions that will facilitate the relationship between personal experience, self-awareness and leadership.

The first objective of the study was to describe the leadership learnings that emerged from the catalytic experiences. Four main categories of learnings were identified, namely: the 'doing' of leadership, the 'being' of leadership, interpersonal relationships and meaning and purpose. These themes and the related subthemes can be contextualised in terms of the second objective, namely to identify the relationships between the learnings, personal leadership and leadership in an organisational context. Consideration was given to the theoretical frameworks emphasising personal leadership and the development of personal mastery through self-awareness. The importance of attributing meaning to life experiences was also explored. The third objective was to distil guidelines or recommendations for leadership development in organisations. The learning process as it relates to the leadership role enabled leaders to get through their catalytic experiences and draw meaning from them. The opportunity created by this study for a time of reflection was also of value.

The four themes uncovered in the findings concur with the leadership frameworks. Smith (2009) identifies three categories of leadership that speak directly to the first three themes in the findings, namely professional leadership corresponding to the 'doing' of leadership, personal leadership corresponding to the 'being' of leadership and interpersonal leadership corresponding to interpersonal relationships. The fourth theme from the findings, meaning and purpose, is included in Smith's description of personal leadership. Cashman's (2008, p. 15) 'leadership from the inside out' looks at two aspects of leadership: inner and outer leadership. These align with the research findings by considering inner leadership as corresponding to the two themes of leadership the 'being' of leadership and meaning and purpose. Outer leadership corresponds to the remaining two themes from the findings, the 'doing' of leadership and interpersonal relationships. Similarly Covey's (2004) whole person approach to leadership describes leadership in terms of two broad categories, character and competence, that relate to the themes of the 'being' of leadership and meaning and purpose and the themes of the 'doing' of leadership and interpersonal relationships respectively. The final leadership framework considered was Senge's (1990) servant leadership. Servant leadership includes leadership aspects relating to leadership of self and others. It does not exclude the need to be a leader in terms of the 'doing' of leadership but the framework specifically seeks to explore the 'being' aspects of leadership together with meaning and purpose and interpersonal relationships. Senge's servant leadership corresponds to these three themes of the research findings, namely the 'being' of leadership, interpersonal relationships and meaning and purpose.

The characteristics of personal mastery identified from these leadership frameworks were also identified in the present study. Within the theme of the 'being' of leadership there are three subthemes relating to character, self-awareness and self-development. The personal mastery aspects aligned to this theme are authenticity, integrity and character, as part of the subtheme of character, self-knowledge corresponding to the subtheme of self-awareness and growth, maturity and learning corresponding to the subtheme of self-development. In the theme of interpersonal relationships, there are two subthemes: the first is developing people and the second is communication and building relationships. The corresponding personal mastery aspects are abundance and potential (corresponding to developing people) and trust (corresponding to communication and building relationships). The final personal mastery aspect of service corresponds to the theme of meaning and purpose. Self-awareness was identified in the literature review as a key component contributing to personal mastery (Hattingh, 2000) and it was also a prominent feature of the learnings in the present study.

In all the frameworks, meaning and purpose can be considered as part of the 'being' of leadership. Leadership learnings relating to meaning and purpose came out strongly in the findings of the study. What enabled all the leaders

to pull through their challenging catalytic experiences was the fact that they had a reason to push through. This gave them a strong sense of purpose. Based on Frankl's (1984) work, it is the people who can centre their work on a strong sense of meaning and purpose who eventually find the will and determination to carry on despite the challenges. Every leader in the study did this to a greater or lesser extent in order to get through their challenging catalytic experience. Whether this sense of purpose related to survival, responsibility in providing for the family or establishing an autonomous identity, the sense of purpose was strongly grounded in their experience. Every leader was able to get through and survive their experiences and then to draw learnings from them because of their ability to relate the challenging experience to a sense of meaning and purpose.

The findings provide support for the proposed influence of catalytic experiences in the development of the characteristics underlying personal leadership. The combination of themes and subthemes that emerged was unique to this group of participants and their experiences, but these themes and subthemes could be contextualised in terms of the theoretical framework, thus providing support for and adding to the latter. The proposed process of reflection leading to self-awareness and attribution of meaning was recognised together with the concepts underlying the higher order constructs of personal mastery and personal leadership. In addition to the theoretical contribution, these findings can also be implemented at an organisational level to improve the link between personal experience and leadership.

Firstly, a holistic view of leadership that brings together the 'doing' and 'being' aspects of leadership will contribute to leadership and organisational effectiveness. Both the 'doing' and the 'being' of leadership were reflected in the factors that helped participants get through the catalytic experiences and derive a sense of meaning from these experiences. The themes that were identified would be beneficial in planning any leadership development intervention within an organisation. Participants mentioned: external factors such as goal setting, intrapersonal factors related to character building and self-awareness and interpersonal factors including self-development through coaching and therapy as well as the development of others. This indicates that resources for dealing with difficult situations can come from an internal and external perspective. Leaders who have access to both may be helped in processing the experience more quickly and effectively. This is linked to the whole person approach to leadership (Covey, 2004).

Secondly, opportunities for reflection could be created and sought out. The leaders who used coaching and therapy found these modalities to be helpful in drawing out the learnings and deriving meaning from their experiences. The opportunity for reflection provided by the interview process, as part of the research study, was particularly valuable for some participants. It was the first time that they became aware of the extent of the impact that the catalytic experience

had had on them. Before the interview, they understood that they needed to push through, move on or survive. Looking back and spending time talking about it and reflecting on their past experiences helped them realise the significance of the experience and that it had a considerable influence on who they are, as leaders, today.

The study was based on self-reporting by the leaders with no corroboration of their leadership-related learnings and the impact on their leadership style by other parties that may have been involved. In future research it may be valuable to include feedback reflecting the observations of others. A 360-degree feedback process will imply self-reports and observations by others. Reliance on a once-off interview also limits opportunities for insights gained with time and further prompting. Aspects raised by the participants could be followed up in further studies. This includes a potential relationship between values and personal leadership as well as how leadership is driven by personal valence. A quantitative research design can furthermore be considered. Now that the major themes have been identified, one can embark on a large-scale study that shows how leaders view their learnings in terms of the themes identified. Objectivity in this type of study can be enhanced by means of a team approach.

The key learning from this study is to recognise the internal treasure chest that is inherent in each individual. It will help people become good leaders if they look deep inside themselves to understand themselves better and recognise the deep sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. It is the unique qualities and experiences that people have that contribute to their leadership journey and it is through life experiences and challenges that people develop and grow. Even a small learning and shift from within can have a far-reaching impact. If leaders continue to seek meaning and learnings from these experiences, they will discover everything they need in order to be true leaders.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

D.S.H. (PEAC Solutions) conducted the research as a part of her master's dissertation. R.v.E. (University of South Africa) was the supervisor for this study. Both authors contributed to the writing of the article.

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