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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How leadership course facilitators cope with difficult course situations

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how facilitators of group dynamic and structured leadership courses cope with difficult situations during the course, and to relate their coping strategies to general individual characteristics and situation-specific appraisals. The study group consisted of facilitators of two of the most widespread leadership courses in Sweden: 110 facilitators of the course Understanding Group and Leader (UGL) and 111 facilitators of Developmental leadership (DL). A web-based questionnaire included descriptions of two difficult interpersonal course situations and questions on personality, general leadership style as well as situation-specific appraisal and coping. Three coping strategies were identified (factor analyses): Focus on course structure, Focus on psychological safety and Focus on own reflection. These factors were positively correlated. Weak associations were observed between the coping strategies and personality and general leadership style. Situation-specific appraisals covaried more strongly with the coping strategies. The findings suggest that reflection based on these coping strategies can lead to increased self-awareness and self-confidence on part of the facilitator. The findings may also help leadership course facilitators to cope more effectively, which in turn creates trust in the group that they are leading. The study contributes to the understanding of a limited research area; how leadership course facilitators cope with difficult course situations. The results provide guidance on how to cope more effectively. Practical implications include aspects to focus on in the training of leadership course facilitators.

Keywords: Leadership course facilitators, difficult situations, personality, leadership, appraisal, coping

Introduction

Leadership development courses often use the small group format to enhance learning, irrespective of whether the course is more structured or more group dynamically oriented in nature. These courses are typically limited to a few days or sessions, and there is a risk that potentially dysfunctional group processes may have significantly negative effects on the course outcome. This differs from dysfunctional group processes in ordinary working

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groups, where there is usually ample time to try to come to grips with such issues. The limited time underscores the importance that the facilitators (sometimes called leaders) of leadership courses are confident and capable of acting in situations characterised by problematic group processes.

Referring to working life in general, Branson's (1981) classical writings on how to cope with "difficult people" are used extensively in leadership development contexts. However, these, and similar, writings tend to focus on deviant individuals, rather than on dysfunctional group processes that may occur in temporary, time-limited groups. This is also valid for conflicts, which many times are viewed at the individual level rather than at the relational or system level.

A common learning objective in leadership developmental courses using group dynamic processes is an increased understanding of effective teamwork (Salas et al., 2005, Sjøvold, 2006, Wheelan, 2005), and increased awareness of how emotions affect group outcomes (Bion, 1961). Today many leadership courses focus on increased individual responsibility, implying that course facilitators should reduce their guidance. This can create a delicate balance for course facilitators. If the guidance is perceived by course participants as being too vague, they may react with avoidance or competition.

In some group dynamics leadership courses, conflicts are welcomed and even initially promoted, since they represent an avenue for experiential learning (Kolb, 2015; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 2005). However, some group processes are less welcome and test the coping ability of the course facilitator. Bion (1961) talked about irrational behaviors in groups (basic assumption groups), leading to group regression where members' needs take over the group orientation. An example is when members search for a strong leader to 'take care of things'. Another kind of unwelcome group process is when individuals are ignored and excluded, being bullied by the rest of the group (Einarsen, 1999; Skogstad et al., 2011; Williams & Nida, 2011). This does not only threaten the psychological needs and well-being of the excluded individual, but also impairs the entire group's possibilities to become effective. It is important for course facilitators to be able to handle processes such as dysfunctional conflicts, overly critical participants, or exclusion behaviors. In such situations, course leaders need to address both aspects to not become a passive, destructive leader (Einarsen et al., 2007). In a good learning situation, both course facilitators and members are confident that the course facilitator can manage "difficult situations". Research on leadership course facilitators' appraisal of and coping with various kinds of undesirable course situations appear to be very limited (see Day, 2000; Day et al., 2014; Dvir et al., 2002; Rapp Ricciardi, 2017).

In summary, existent research offers little guidance for leadership course facilitators on how to cope with difficult and undesirable course situations. Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore how facilitators of group dynamic and structured leadership courses cope with difficult situations, and to relate their coping strategies to general individual characteristics and to situation-specific appraisal that can facilitate or aggravate the use of the strategies.

Method

Study setting and participants

The Swedish Defence University is responsible for two of the most widespread leadership courses in Sweden. Both courses aim to increase the participants' self-awareness, and are

not traditional theoretical courses with lectures. One course is called Understanding Group and Leader (UGL) and the other Developmental Leadership (DL).[1] UGL is based on models of group development (e.g., Bales, 1950; Bion, 1961; Schutz, 1958; Wheelan, 2005) as well as on the DL model (Larsson et al., 2003, 2018). The objective of UGL is for the participants to become more effective group members and leaders. Learning occurs through the experience of situations reflecting group dynamics through an experiential learning model (Kolb, 2015). The DL course is more structured and can be characterized as a version of Bass's (1998, 1999) transformational leadership, refined and adapted for a Scandinavian context (Larsson et al., 2003). The participants receive 360° feedback on their leadership behaviors and work in small groups on personal development plans. Both UGL and DL are led by two course facilitators.

   The Swedish Defence University is responsible for the training and continued development of UGL and DL course facilitators. At the time of writing, there were around 670 active facilitators of UGL and DL altogether. In the spring 2019, a web-based questionnaire (see below) was sent by e-mail to these course facilitators. Responses were obtained from 110 UGL facilitators (33.3% response rate) and 111 DL facilitators (33.3% response rate). The UGL facilitator group consisted of 63 men (57%) and 47 women (43%) with a mean age of 55.8 years ($SD = 8.9$). The DL facilitator group was composed of 51 men (46%) and 60 women (54%) with a mean age of 55.4 years ($SD = 8.3$).

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of a general part and a section with questions related to two specific descriptions of leadership course situations, generated by a previous pilot study (Jonsson, 2020). The general part included conventional background questions, a personality inventory and a leadership style questionnaire.

Personality

The Single Item Measures of Personality (SIMP: Woods & Hampson, 2005) scale is a personality scale that measures the Big Five personality dimensions: (1) Extraversion, (2) Agreeableness, (3) Emotional stability (Neuroticism reversed), (4) Conscientiousness and (5) Openness. The SIMP instrument consists of five bipolar items (scale ranging from 1 to 9), presenting two dichotomous statements for each of the dimensions. Although it is a brief measurement scale, the SIMP has been shown to have both convergent and divergent validity (Woods & Hampson, 2005).

Leadership style

A selection of items from the Development Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ, Larsson, 2006) was chosen to map the facilitators' general leadership style. Six items formed the leadership style dimension" Developmental (transformational) leadership", alpha = .70, for example:" I act in agreement with my expressed views". The leadership style dimension "Destructive leadership" includes five items, alpha = .63, example: "I put my own needs ahead of those of the group". Each item had a 9-point response scale ranging from $1 =$ Never or almost never to $9 =$ Very often or always.

Situation-specific measures

The questionnaire included the following two written situation descriptions.[2] The first situation, henceforth called "Reluctant complainers", describes a group where the members act tentatively and cautiously. They do not seem to take responsibility for their own part in the course. During a break, you hear some of the members saying that they are disappointed with the course—"it's much too slow". The second situation, henceforth called "Excluded member", describes a group in which a member receives little or no attention from other members, is not invited into discussions, and his/her statements are often met with silence. As the course proceeds, the silence evolves into quizzical looks and sighs between the others. Each of these two situation presentations was followed by two sets of questions, designed to measure how the situation was appraised and coped with. The selection of situations was based on a preceding pilot study (Jonsson, 2020). The two situations: (a) were more frequently reported; (b) were perceived as difficult to manage; and (c) were applicable to both UGL and DL courses.

Situational appraisals were mapped with the Emotional Stress Reaction Questionnaire—Care version (ESRQ—Care; Larsson & Wilde Larsson, 2010, 2012). This instrument draws on the idea that our emotions reflect our immediately preceding cognitive appraisal processes (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The ESRQ—Care consists of 30 emotion words designed to reflect the main appraisal categories presented by Lazarus and Folkman (1984): irrelevant, benign-positive, challenge and threat/harm/loss. The latter category is subdivided in the ESRQ—Care version into fear-related, shame-related and anger-related appraisals. Based on a pilot study with open questions and answers, two items ("curious" and "interested", later included in the category Challenge) were added (Jonsson, 2020).

The response format for all items was a 4-point Likert scale with the following anchors: The word does not correspond to how I feel (0); The word partly corresponds to how I feel (1); The word fairly well corresponds to how I feel (2); and The word completely corresponds to how I feel (3). The instructions were:" Below is a list of words describing different emotions. Next to each word there are four response alternatives. Circle the alternative that best describes how you feel in the situation as a facilitator. Respond with the alternative that first comes to your mind".

The number of items in each category and the scale Cronbach alpha were as follows (same items in both situations, Cronbach alpha coefficients for situation A presented before the coefficients for situation B): Irrelevant — 1 item (no Cronbach alpha), Benign-positive — 6 items (.78/.72), Challenge — 6 items (.86/.86), Threat/harm/loss fear-related — 9 items (.85/.81), Threat/harm/loss shame-related — 4 items (.76/.74) and Threat/harm/loss anger-related — 4 items (.74/.75).

Coping strategies in both situations were mapped with 12 items. These were constructed especially for this study and were based on responses obtained in a previous pilot study (Jonsson, 2020). Factor analyses (principal axis factoring with oblique rotation) were performed four times—one for each situation among UGL and DL facilitators separately. Fairly comparable results were obtained in all these analyses, and we decided to accept a general 3-factor solution, each factor consisting of three items. Three items were dropped because of mixed factor loadings. Responses were entered on 6-point response scales ranging from Do not agree at all (1) to Fully agree (6). Responses were related to the following question:

"Mark how well the following alternative corresponds to what you normally do as facilitator in this situation". The following factors emerged:

- Focus on course structure – 3 items, alpha = .80:" I explain the aim and content of the course more clearly";" I ask participants to remember their expectations on the course"; "I point out the guidelines of the course in order to manage the situation".
- Focus on psychological safety – 3 items, alpha = .63: "I normalize and confirm the participants' reactions";" I create trust";" I ask the participants to talk about their feelings and needs".
- Focus on own reflection – 3 items, alpha = .54: "I reflect on what, who or which members are obstructing the development of the group"; "I discuss with my colleague how we work together, with the group and whether we need to adjust anything"; "I wait and see if the group members themselves will deal with the situation".

Statistics

Descriptive statistics and correlations (Pearson's r) were computed. Subgroup comparisons were performed using t-test. Statistical significance was assumed at $p < .05$.

Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of human research (Swedish Research Council, 2002) i.e., the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice. All participants voluntarily gave their informed consent to participation.

Results

Frequency of encountering difficult course situations

Table 1 shows that in the group of group dynamics course facilitators, situations with "reluctant complainers" were experienced more often than "excluded member". In the group of structured course facilitators, both of the difficult situations rarely occur.

Facilitators' coping strategies

As shown above in the Measures section, three coping strategies were found to apply to both types of courses and both types of difficult situations. The bivariate correlations between the coping strategies were as follows—Focus on course structure vs. Focus on psychological safety: .46 ($p < .001$), Focus on course structure vs. Focus on own reflection: .26 ($p < .01$) and Focus on psychological safety vs. Focus on own reflection: .25 ($p < .001$). Thus, all three coping strategies were positively related to each other.

Comparison of facilitators' use of coping strategies

The facilitators of the two different types of leadership courses were compared regarding their usage of the coping strategies (see Table 2).

Table 1. Frequency of encountering difficult course situations.

Frequency of encountering this situation	Group dynamic course (n = 110)		Structured course (n = 111)	
	A "Reluctant complainer"	B "Excluded member"	A "Reluctant complainer"	B "Excluded member"
Almost every course	7%	2%	3%	0%
Most courses	14%	4%	4%	2%
About every second course	5%	5%	3%	1%
Sometimes	46%	32%	26%	22%
Almost never	26%	49%	57%	51%
Never	2%	8%	8%	24%

Table 2. Comparison of facilitators use of coping strategies.

Coping strategy[a]	Group dynamic course facilitators		Structured course facilitators			
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Focus on course structure	3.85	1.12	4.38	1.03	−3.57	.000
Focus on psychological safety	4.43	0.91	4.35	0.87	0.67	.519
Focus on own reflection	4.82	0.73	4.48	0.78	3.22	.001

[a]Scale of scores could range from 1 (Does not apply at all) to 6 (Fully applies).

All three coping strategies were used. The most common strategy in both groups was Focus on own reflection. As can be seen in Table 2, the facilitators of the UGL group dynamic courses use the coping strategy Focus on own reflection significantly more than facilitators of the structured DL courses. The picture was reversed regarding the coping strategy Focus on course structure.

Relationship between facilitator characteristics and coping strategies

There were no significant differences (t-tests) between female and male facilitators' usage of the three coping strategies. The bivariate correlations between various individual facilitator characteristics and the coping strategies are shown in Table 3.

A perusal of Table 3 indicates that personality was unrelated to the use of the three coping strategies. Other general individual characteristics, such as age and general leadership style, were positively related to the use of two of the three coping strategies. A clearer picture emerged when the specific appraisals of the two given situations were rated. In both cases, appraising the situation as challenging and benign-positive in general covaried with more use of the strategies. The coping strategy Focus on psychological safety differed from the other two in that the three threat/harm/loss appraisals, resulting in feelings of fear, shame and anger, were associated with less use of this strategy.

Table 3 shows weak bivariate associations between the personality and coping scales, and stronger relationships between the situation-specific appraisal scales and coping, in

Table 3. Correlation between facilitators' personal characteristics and coping strategies ($n = 221$).

Facilitator characteristics	Coping strategies		
	Focus on course structure	Focus on psychological safety	Focus on own reflection
Age	.20**	.14*	.06
Personality			
Extraversion	.02	.08	.10
Agreeableness	−0.07	−0.06	−0.12
Emotional Stability	.01	.04	−0.04
Conscientiousness	.04	.07	.01
Openness	−0.08	.10	−0.06
General leadership style			
Developmental leadership	.16*	.24**	.11
Destructive leadership	−0.11	−0.09	.10
Situation-specific appraisal			
A. Irrelevant	−0.05	−0.06	−0.07
A. Benign-positive	.12	.27**	.19**
A. Challenge	.26**	.32**	.09
A. Threat/harm/loss (fear)	−0.04	−0.20**	.06
A. Threat/harm/loss (shame)	−0.04	−0.17*	.01
A. Threat/harm/loss (anger)	.02	−0.14*	.00
B. Irrelevant	.00	.01	.02
B. Benign-positive	.17*	.18*	.11
B. Challenge	.24**	.28**	.16*
B. Threat/harm/loss (fear)	−0.02	−0.19*	.04
B. Threat/harm/loss (shame)	.06	−0.19*	−0.03
B. Threat/harm/loss (anger)	.00	−0.13	−0.05

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$.

particular regarding the strategy Focus on psychological safety. Theoretically, it could be argued that the appraisal indicators are, at least partly, determined by personality factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, additional correlation computations were performed between these two sets of scales. Most correlations were low and nonsignificant. The exception was the personality scale Emotional stability in the situation with "Reluctant complainers", which correlated negatively with the three threat/harm/loss appraisals characterized by feelings of fear (-0.27, $p < .001$), shame (-0.14, $p < .05$) and anger (-0.21, $p < .01$). In the situation with an "Excluded member", only one significant result was found, Openness correlated positively with the threat/harm/loss appraisal causing fear emotions (.17, $p < .05$).

Addendum – open responses on coping strategies

The questionnaire included an open response question related to each of the two difficult situations. The question was: Do you do something else? What? When categorizing the responses, it was noted that fairly similar suggestions were provided to both situations by the UGL and DL facilitators. Except for the comments that it all "depends" on the nuances in the situation, the response categories could be characterized along an active—passive continuum as follows:

- Think and act as a developmental leader: be a role model, support, confront, encourage
- Act early if it is an unacceptable behavior
- Act preventatively
- Talk about consequences of behaviors
- Ask open-ended questions
- Give your perspective on the course of events
- Ask the participants to reflect on the events
- Trust the process – let the group take responsibility and find solutions before intervening

Discussion

The study explored how leadership development course facilitators cope with difficult interpersonal course situations, including an investigation of the relation between the course leaders' coping strategies and their individual characteristics and situation-specific appraisals. Three coping strategies were identified: Focus on course structure, Focus on psychological safety and Focus on own reflection. The findings in this study suggest that these strategies may have a general relevance for various kinds of leadership courses. In this study, quite similar factor solutions were found for two kinds of difficult course situations in structured and group dynamic courses, respectively. Both situations illustrate the case where group members are unsure of what is expected of them. In psychodynamic terms, they project their anxiety on either the course facilitator or other group members (Bion, 1961).

The strategies that emerged are supported in the studies of for example Wheelan (2005) and Edmondson (1999). Structure, provided from a leader, is necessary in the beginning of a group's development, when participants do not know one another or when the setting is new. At this stage, structure provides a degree of safety (e.g., Wheelan, 2005).

Edmondson studied safety in terms of psychological safety, which she found to be a prerequisite for effective learning. The psychological safety of teams is defined as a shared belief that the team is a safe place for interpersonal risk taking—that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up (Edmondson, 1999). Although Edmondson's studies focus on real working groups, the same phenomenon was observed in the two studied leadership courses. Hence, to focus on psychological safety as a course facilitator could promote a learning environment in the group.

Additionally, the focus on psychological safety also seems to be beneficial for the facilitators themselves, as they experience less threat-related emotions. Here it is appropriate to raise the issue of causation. Are facilitators who use this strategy more secure, or do they focus on creating an environment of psychological safety to moderate their own negative

emotions? Previous studies have found that a self-fulfilling profile (high positive affect and low negative affect) among UGL facilitators was associated with self-awareness and adaptive coping skills (Rapp Ricciardi et al., 2014). The results stress the importance of self-awareness in the facilitators, of reflection individually and together with the colleague, and of asking questions such as: Why and for whose sake do I act?; and, When do I have/lose control over the situation?

The three coping strategies were positively correlated, indicating that most facilitators use all of them, as shown in Table 2. The observed differences in proportions between the two types of leadership courses appear to be logical. Facilitators of the more structured leadership course use the strategy Focus on course structure to a higher degree, while leaders of group dynamic courses emphasized own reflection to a greater extent. Too much focus on structure could have a negative effect in group dynamics settings, e.g., during collective reflection (cf. the reflective stage in Kolb's, 2015, learning cycle). Similarly, more reflective facilitator behaviors could be negative in a typically individual-oriented and well-structured leadership course. As emphasized in the comments unacceptable behaviors must be addressed directly. However, the way in which the facilitators address the problem might vary greatly, depending on the type of course. In UGL, one of the aims is for participants to learn more about how they influence others and how they themselves are influenced by others. The course facilitators support the group in noticing and talking about relevant topics.

The three coping strategies showed weak relationships with general individual facilitator characteristics such as gender and personality. A different picture emerged when the relationships between the three coping strategies and the facilitators' situation-specific appraisals were analysed. In the case of the coping strategy Focus on psychological safety, negative correlations were also found with the three appraisal categories threat/harm/loss—fear-oriented, threat/harm/loss—shame-oriented and threat/harm/loss—anger-oriented. Appraising the problematic situations as benign-positive and as a challenge also covaried with much use of the strategy Focus on psychological safety, and partly with the other two strategies. This may indicate a hypothetical causal chain, where emotional stability increases the likelihood of more benign-positive and challenge appraisals and less threat/harm/loss appraisals. Previous studies have reported similar findings with positive affect, optimism, and coping strategies (Nes & Segerstrom, 2006; Watson et al., 1988). Further research is needed to confirm this.

Additionally, the stronger associations between situation-specific appraisals and coping can be viewed in the light of findings from studies on the importance of domain-specific, rather than global, self-confidence. Söderhjelm et al. (2018) found that leaders' confidence in the leadership role strongly affected how their subordinates experienced their leadership behaviors. A leader could do everything "by the book", but if he or she signalled a weak confidence in their leadership role, this reduced the impact of the favorable overt behaviors. If this holds true for leadership course facilitators as well, it points to a critical area for training of facilitators. Reflection based on the coping strategies may lead to increased self-awareness and self-confidence, which, in turn, creates trust in the group. This reasoning conveys a spirit of some optimism, as it is likely easier to develop leadership role-specific confidence rather than global confidence and emotional stability.

Given the lack of previous research on leadership facilitators' coping with difficult course situations, the findings can also be related to previous studies on what creates immediate

trust in leaders of temporary groups. Hyllengren et al. (2011) identified several hundred minor indicators that can be clustered into a few categories. These are similar to the coping strategy Focus on psychological safety. Thus, becoming aware of this coping strategy and practicing it may help leadership course facilitators to cope more effectively. It should also be emphasized that if other types of situations, including more frequently occurring and less dysfunctional episodes, had been studied, a different pattern of coping strategies might have emerged.

Still, we suggest that the two selected situations open for a broader perspective of group dynamics. The passivity of group members in situation A can be understood in terms of Bion's concept of group regression, the dependent basic assumption group (Bion, 1961). This leadership course context finding, can, in turn, be related to real groups and organizations, particularly in authoritarian organizational cultures. Thus, strategies used by course leaders could provide valuable insights on how to handle group regression in real life. Situation B, where a group member was excluded, is theoretically related to writings on bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Skogstad et al., 2011; Williams & Nida, 2011), and group cohesion (or lack thereof, in this case). Thus, using the concepts instrumental and affective group cohesion (Griffith & Vaitkus, 1999), situation B can be understood as a prototypical case of low affective cohesion. Here, in addition, course leader' coping strategies may have valuable implications for real-life working groups.

The strengths of the study include a fairly high number of leadership course facilitators, both men and women. Most of the measurement tools were established in previous research and the new scales developed for this study were derived from a preceding pilot study (Jonsson, 2020). A limitation of the study is that both courses are Swedish and consequently study participants were Scandinavian. From experience, we also know that most of the participants in these leadership courses are well-educated, white collar individuals. Thus, the results cannot be used to draw general conclusions that applies to other cultures and work contexts. The fact that there were no or only weak relationships between coping strategies and general individual facilitator characteristics, such as gender and personality, also implies that leadership course facilitators are a rather homogeneous group.

The Cronbach alpha coefficients on some of the scales, in particular the coping scale Focus on own reflection, calls for caution when interpreting the findings. It has often been noted that the creation of coping scales with cross-situational validity is difficult (see e.g., Zeidner & Endler, 1996). In the light of this, the stability of the observed three coping factors across situations and types of courses were still promising. However, further and more detailed studies across a broader spectrum of problematic situations are needed. The presented continuum of active to passive coping options (open responses) serve as a source of inspiration.

Another theoretically oriented suggestion for further research concerns the weak observed associations between the antecedent conditions gender and personality, and the three coping strategies. A search for mediating constructs such as domain-specific self-confidence would be interesting.

Some practical implications of the results include what aspects to focus on in the training of leadership course facilitators. In particular, the connection between appraisal of specific course situations, and the coping strategies used, may serve as a basis for targeted training of facilitators. Along the same lines, Human Resource Management departments could design problematic interpersonal cases and use them when selecting course facilitators. Reflection about one's own action as a course facilitator can strengthen the competence

and the role-specific confidence. In turn, confident course facilitators are more likely to create a trustful learning environment, which is likely to have beneficial effects on the participant's learning and development.

Notes

1. Both courses are five days in duration, where UGL is given consecutively, while DL is three plus two days with a two-month long intermission in between. UGL has 8-12 participants and DL has 6-16 participants, or 16-24 participants, if participants work in the same organization.
2. The content of these two situations is the same for both courses, although there are some course specific adjustments.

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