

## The Development of Social Capital through a Leadership Training Program

Jenepher Lennox Terrion, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

[University of Ottawa](#)

554 King Edward Avenue

Ottawa, Ontario Canada K1N 6N5

Phone: 613-562-5800 (2517) Fax: 613-562-5240

[jlennoxt@uottawa.ca](mailto:jlennoxt@uottawa.ca)

Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine how a leadership training program provides a forum for social capital creation through the establishment and maintenance of networks and through discussion and problem solving by participants. This article provides insights into the role of informal learning in management development and shows the critical role of formal training in establishing bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

## The Development of Social Capital through a Leadership Training Program

Like other organizations, universities are working to hone the competencies of their administrators to become more competitive, transparent and effective. Gopee (2002) argues that mechanisms such as formal training are necessary to support lifelong learning, but asserts that “substantial informal teaching, learning and facilitation of learning occur through work-based contacts with other ... professionals” (p. 608). He also notes that there is a gap in the literature regarding the process that occurs as people “learn in corridors, over tea, in the car park, as well as through unnoticed patterns of behavior and interaction in the classroom itself” (Field, 1999, p.12. Cited in Gopee, 2002, p. 610).

In referring to the role of interaction in learning, Gopee (2002) implies that social capital is the primary means by which adults learn in organizations and that this process has been neglected in the professional development literature. While financial capital describes a family’s wealth or income and human capital is measured by parents’ education, Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as a resource, “made up of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital” (p. 243).

Later work by Putnam (2000) refined the definition of social capital to include the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that exist in the social networks of individuals. Del Favero (2003) specifically examines social capital in institutes of higher education and argues that the development of social capital, or social ties, between administrators and faculty members is essential to the effective governance of universities.

Most scholars argue that social capital is not a single entity that people either have or do not have but that it exists on at least three dimensions (Putnam, 2000;

Woolcock, 2001). The first dimension of social capital is bonding, which refers to homogeneous relationships with those of similar background and status (Woolcock, 2001). Bonding social capital provides a feeling of belonging and is critical to the sense of well-being of group members and fulfills immediate needs for connection, emotional support and solidarity.

Bridging, the second dimension, refers to relations outside of the immediate network. It is a horizontal dimension, referring to heterogeneous relationships with more distant friends, relations and colleagues. While Del Favero (2003) proposes that it is the *bonds* between faculty and administrators that must be fostered to enhance university governance, she is really referring to *bridging* social capital, if we accept bridging social capital to mean that which spans the immediate social network. Regardless of the label, Del Favero's (2003) insistence on the importance of social capital to organizational effectiveness is noteworthy.

Linking social capital, the third dimension, contributes a vertical characteristic, whereby individuals create connections with individuals in positions of power "... in order to leverage resources, ideas and information" (Woolcock, 2001, p. 13). Linking social capital provides opportunities in the form of access to career opportunities, mentoring, advice and resources.

Clearly, social capital provides organizational members with much needed resources and information. It would be of interest, therefore, to assess a formal training program to ascertain how participants perceive the development of their social capital. Specifically, the following research question was posed: In what ways does participation in a management training program contribute to the creation of bonding, bridging and linking social capital?

### *A Management Training Case Study*

Based on a training needs assessment of the University of Ottawa's ([UofO](#)) directors of administrative units (such as Human Resources, Material Management, Security, Finance and so on), the Management Leadership Program (MLP) was designed (See [program brochure](#)). Thirteen modules, including Leadership, Coaching, Time Management, Project Management, Conflict Resolution, Presentation Skills, and other professional development courses are offered in one- or two-day formats.

### Methodology

Research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique from the 36 administrative directors who had participated in some or all of the training modules. Specifically, eleven subjects were selected based on three criteria: (1) if they began the management leadership program in its first or second year of operation; (2) if they had completed at least eight modules (out of 13) at the time; and (3) if they had *not* changed jobs. The selection criteria allowed for minimal variation in exposure to training. Changes were made to some modules after receiving feedback from early participants so selecting only subjects who had begun the program in its first or second year reduced this potential variation. Limiting the sample to those who had completed at least eight modules ensured that subjects had been exposed to enough training that they would be able to reflect on the impact of the training. Limiting to those who had not changed jobs controlled for variation in learning associated with taking on major new responsibilities.

Two members of the sample declined to participate, citing time constraints. Of the nine subjects who agreed to participate, there were four women and five men, and

four Anglophones and five Francophones representing a diverse range of administrative units within the university.

Individual semi-structured interviews lasting from 60 to 80 minutes were conducted by the researcher with each of the nine subjects. During interviews, which were taped and transcribed verbatim, subjects reflected on their experience during and after the training program. As the goal was to identify references to bonding, bridging and linking social capital, a thematic assessment was used. To ensure inter-coder reliability, coding of the data was conducted using the following procedures: Three coders, the author and two undergraduate research assistants, independently reviewed all of the narratives to identify any statement that reflected the speaker's observation of the development of bonding, bridging or linking social capital. Then the three coders met to discuss and agree upon the operational definitions of the dimensions of social capital. Next, the coders independently coded all of the narratives for references to the dimensions of social capital. Finally, the coders worked together to reach agreement on coded units. Disagreements between the coders were resolved through discussion. In this manner, the coders reached 100 per cent agreement on the identification of the themes.

## Results

The narratives contained numerous references to the impact of the MLP on the development of participants' social capital. One participant referred to the time to reflect and the social network created by the MLP, rather than the content of the modules that was important to her learning process:

The thing that I really enjoyed about this is the ability to get together with some colleagues who were also doing the same types of jobs that I'm

doing and getting feedback from them within the context of the modules and sort of feeding off each other in terms of how they're coping with different things and how they handle it. So it may not have been the topic itself that was helpful or what we were doing but the interactions that were taking place...

While this participant referred specifically to the informal learning experienced during the MLP, clearly she credited the program with facilitating this learning opportunity. Three examples illustrate this success marker. The first example is from a participant who speaks of the partnerships that resulted from people he met during the training:

I think it brought us far closer. One person that I didn't know and I never had very much to do with is the director of co-op. I was on module 1 with her and another one and you know just having lunches and it brought us much closer and it brought our services much closer.

The second example comes from a participant who states that the MLP enabled her to develop a network and that this network enabled her to more easily gain necessary information and provide it to others:

I found that really useful, the development of my network. When you see people outside of the office, this helps to create the links for your network. I can get information so much more effectively now, because I know who to ask. And I am much more able to help my colleagues get what they need.

The third example points to the importance of ensuring that newly appointed managers have the opportunity very early on to meet their peers and develop their network:

Part of the value of a program like that is to have people create a network.

That's for me, a really important outcome. I had just arrived and I could really connect with people and say, well that was very positive, and we still meet from time to time, once or twice a year, for coffee or lunch.

In addition to discussing the immediate impact of the training on their relational development, participants reported that interactions with the network they had established during the training continued long after the module was completed and greatly contributed to their learning process. For example, one participant stated that:

Since then there's been a small group of us who get together regularly for lunch or we email each other if there's a particular issue and if we want to know how another person's dealing with it in terms of buying computers for professors or what is our policy on vacation or how do we do this or that and it's really been helpful so we've been able to build a level of trust.

Clearly, then, interpersonal communication during and after the training modules facilitated the learning process. In summary, participants identified the development of their social capital as one of the main outcomes of their experience in the MLP. As seen here, the formal training seems to facilitate or enable the informal learning to take place, in large part through the interaction during the training with their peers and the ongoing relationships established as a result.

### Discussion

The MLP provides the forum and the opportunity for directors to discuss, exchange information and solve problems with their peers and to establish a network of colleagues that they could draw on for information and inspiration in the weeks and

months following the modules. The impact of the interaction with colleagues cannot be underestimated. As proposed by Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell (2003), “informal learning for managers is a social process” (p. 379) that is dependent on communication with others. Enos et al. (2003) argue that “actions, in concert with interactions with others in the workplace, serve as an important vehicle in which domain-specific knowledge is generated, articulated, and dispersed throughout an organization” (p. 381). Enos et al. (2003) conclude that neither action nor interaction alone is sufficient for learning, but that their integration is necessary. The MLP enables both action and interaction and thus the necessary conditions for the development of management proficiency.

Respondents were conscious that their participation in the MLP removed them from their daily tasks and allowed them to interact with others – both colleagues and trainers – who could help them understand these challenges and identify possible solutions. As noted above, participants reported continuing the newly-formed relationships into the future.

That these relationships continued into the future – in the form of participants’ networks or social capital – ensured that participants could continue the informal learning through ongoing interaction with their peers. As reported by Billet (1994) and Enos et al. (2003), the most powerful source of managerial informal learning is interaction – or the development of social capital – with others. Terrion and Ashforth (2002), in their study of the connections forged between members of an executive development training program, labeled this sense of belonging “*communitas*” and concluded that it was created through the group members’ communication with each other and was critical to the development of cohesiveness in the group. Cohesiveness, defined by Adler and Elmhorst (1999) as “the degree to which members feel themselves

part of a group and want to remain with that group,” (p. 253) has long been associated with “higher rates of job satisfaction and lower rates of tension, absenteeism and turnover” (p. 253).

Clearly, then, a training program like the MLP builds social capital among classmates and thus enhances this sense of belonging or cohesiveness. Thus, bonding social capital is fostered. Bonding social capital is crucial to learning. As Gopee (2002) concludes, “social support can have a marked influence on one’s learning — personal and professional” (p. 615) and “peers and managers should appreciate the contribution of social and human capital to learning” (p. 615). Through enabling discussion and relationship building with others, particularly those in the participants’ network, the MLP contributes to the informal learning process.

The MLP also facilitates bridging or horizontal social capital. By enabling the development of relationships between directors of diverse services and faculties, the MLP encourages the development of interdisciplinary exchanges between members of the university who might never have had the chance to work together, nor even be aware of each other, previously. The knowledge, insight and, indeed, empathy that this newly established network creates is absolutely necessary for the administration of universities, according to Del Favero (2003) and Tierney (1991). In addition, it establishes the trust and reciprocity, cited by Putnam (2000), which allows individuals to use their social capital.

Bridging social capital is particularly important to organizations facing the leadership challenges associated with a multicultural workforce. Multicultural settings, such as universities and governments, require members to work together, transcending cultural differences and building integration across traditional geographical, political,

religious and ethnic boundaries. Encouraging interaction between diverse people – or developing bridging social capital – is critical. Weisinger and Salipante (2005) propose that multicultural organizations must create bonding social capital between diverse members to increase representational diversity, and then use these relationships to facilitate the development of bridging social capital. In other words, bonding social capital must exist as a foundation upon which bridging social capital can be built.

Linking social capital, finally, is also established through the MLP and this, too, facilitates the learning process. Specifically, the MLP brings together small groups of administrators from the most junior to the most senior for 1-3 day workshops. This combination certainly enables junior administrators to build vertical social capital with more senior people but also enables senior people to access information and resources held by the more junior participants (who possess power if not through rank then perhaps through expertise, control of scarce resources, information or any other form of power (Morgan, 1997)). In other words, while linking social capital typically describes the access of vulnerable populations to needed resources possessed by sympathetic people in power, university administrators, while possessing power themselves, need access to other power holders through their relationship with them. And it is just that—the development of relationships that foster learning—that the MLP supports.

Linking social capital is especially critical in organizations concerned with the challenges of succession planning, such as universities and governments, where loss of labor and knowledge resources is expected to be costly in a variety of ways (Walsh, 2006). As Trinkle (2005) argues, tacit knowledge, or knowledge gained through experience, must be transferred from person to person in an organization in order to capture it before senior people retire. Trinkle posits that it is not through technology-

based or written forms that tacit knowledge transfer occurs best, but rather through face to face interaction and conversation. Thus, succession planning is likely enhanced through the development of interpersonal relationships by members from different levels of an organization and it is linking social capital that creates these opportunities.

### Application of the findings

Given the critical importance of building relationships between participants, a number of measures can be taken to both enable relationship development and to build networks and social capital.

- 1) Include a critical mass of participants for each workshop to ensure that there are enough people for each participant to establish or build relationships. A minimum of 8-10 people would be recommended.
- 2) Encourage diverse representation among course participants to ensure linkages between levels, enabling both discussion of shared challenges and a more effective program of succession planning, and the establishment linking social capital.
- 3) Include, if possible, representation from diverse disciplinary, gender, cultural and linguistic communities of the organization to create opportunities for bonding social capital in the first instance and then ultimately, bridging social capital, or pluralistic diversity (Weisinger and Salipante, 2005).
- 4) Ensure ample opportunity to talk informally. Whether course participants engage in small talk about their families, sports, hobbies or holidays or whether they converse about shared organizational challenges, it is critical that participants have the chance to develop relationships with each other through talk. The following initiatives encourage and support communication:

- A. Catered coffee breaks and lunch. If these meals are taken in the classroom then participants are obliged to sit and talk while they eat, thus providing an opportunity for networking.
  - B. Experiential/hands on learning opportunities enable participants to interact. Examples are small group discussions, problem solving exercises, shared presentations of information to the group, and so on.
  - C. Room set up to encourage talk. Classrooms must be set up so that participants feel comfortable connecting with each other and must be distant enough from distractions to enable focus on relationship building. The ideal classroom gives a feeling of being removed from the day-to-day activities, is spacious enough to allow break-out discussions during training, has seating for casual conversation during breaks – both indoors and out – and lends itself well to catered meals.
- 5) Follow-up discussion with other participants, perhaps through the establishment of a “virtual management community,” could serve to provide a place for ongoing discussion of shared problems and solutions, for questions to be posed and answered, and for information to be exchanged. Trainers could meet online with participants 2 weeks and 4 weeks following a workshop to respond to questions and provide feedback on efforts to apply what was learned in the training, as well as to support the ongoing process of social capital development.

### Conclusion

This discussion of the MLP provides insight into how learning occurs and social capital develops for a small sample of university administrators who participated in the program in its first years. Clearly, the program enables the establishment and

maintenance of networks and the opportunity for senior managers to meet, discuss and solve mutual challenges related to higher education management and policy. These outcomes are critical for the directors' professional development as they work to achieve their core competencies and sheds light on the role of training in facilitating bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Those responsible for designing training for administrators and senior management of universities and other large organizations will be able to apply the findings presented in this article to their own training and development programs in order to enhance the learning experience of their participants by facilitating the development of social capital.

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