Phenomenon of Participating in the North Carolina Transportation Leadership Development Program

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Background

This purpose of this research is to explore the participant experience of attending the North Carolina Transportation Leadership Development Program (TLDP). Although TLDP is assumed to have intrinsic value for the transit industry in general and to the participant and her transit system in particular, prior research has not explored these assumptions. The research purpose is to better understand the participant experience to improve marketing of the course and to convey course experiences to potential students. The research design employees a phenomenological approach to ascertain the shared essence of the experience of the first TLDP seminar among the participants.

Research Questions

1. What are the expectations of students entering the seminar?
2. Was there a transformative moment during the seminar?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the seminar?
4. How is the knowledge acquired in the course and seminar being applied?

TLDP Participants discussing the group project

"Instead of just jumping in,… I've found myself trying to be a little more analytical than I would have been in looking at the problem and thinking about it instead of just getting on fire and jumping into it… I'm even like that in my personal life. It [TLDP] gave me that perspective to… slow down and go, 'ok, …there's different ways to approach it'."- Participant 2

"Oh, in those three days it was a world of difference. [spoken fast, excited] I came back to my current job now and I was like 'we need to do this, we need to do this'. 'Oh, by the way, here is something that I learned, let me show it to all you guys.' I did bring the tools back to the work environment."- Participant 1

Participants collaborating on a leadership-building activity

About TLDP

TLDP is a leadership development program sponsored and funded by the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT) Public Transportation Division as well as the participant's transit system. It is administered by the researcher at the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) and delivered by a contractor who owns the course content.

Some characteristics of TLDP include:

- The program is a self-paced, semester-long course with two intensive three-day in-person seminars
- All participants complete a group project on a topic that they select as well as an individual project
- The group project should be of value to the transit industry in general while the individual project should be of value to the participant's employer
- Taught for 18 years
- Each session includes 8-14 students
- Over 300 individuals have been trained, including a large proportion of current NC transit industry leaders

Methodology

The experience of TLDP is deeply personal and depends upon many factors including previous leadership training, advanced degrees, and years in the industry. When these factors are interacted with group dynamics, there are too many human factors involved to make any meaningful inferences from quantitative measures. Thus, this a qualitative research design using the phenomenological method which attempts to define the shared essence of the participant experience (Macaan 1993).

The validity and reliability of the findings are confirmed using four techniques; prolonged engagement, external audits, member checking, and thick, rich descriptions (Creswell 2013).

Research Methodology Summary

Research Subjects	Fall 2015 TLDP Participants
Research Method	Phenomenology
Data Collection	On-site Interviews
Population Size	8
Sample Size	2 (25%)
Interview Duration	30 minutes
Coding Scheme	Emergent, broad to narrow
Final Code Count	9
Final Theme Count	4

Themes and Codes

Theme	Code	Description
Application	Application-Outside	Lessons are applied outside of work
	Application-Work	Lessons are applied at work
Expectations	Expectation-	Negative expectation
	Expectation+	Positive expectation
	Expectation2+	Positive expectation for the second seminar
	Peer	Comment concerning the influence of having peer's at the training
Assessment	Strength	Identified strength of the program
	Weakness	Identified weakness of the program
Transformation	Transformation	Transformative moment during the training

Selected References

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Macann, C. E. (1993). *Four phenomenological philosophers : Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty*. London ;New York: Routledge.

Conclusions

- TLDP has value to the participants being trained to be future leaders related to developing and applying enhanced communication and leadership skills
- This type of learning excited the participants and energized them to return to their work environments ready to address existing challenges and be able to identify new challenges
- The students of TLDP share experiences and learning trajectories during the first seminar, with participants experiencing a transformative moment
- Knowledge gained at TLDP is viewed as being helpful not only in a participant's professional life, but in the personal life as well
- Cohort size and composition is a commonly unmet expectation
- The benefits of leadership training are not only of high value to the participants, but also to their transportation agencies
- Future research is necessary to quantify the benefits of this leadership training and compare these benefits to the costs incurred by the sponsoring agencies. The maximum cost to a transportation agency for this training is roughly $4,000 per participant to cover tuition, travel, housing, and lost productivity during the seminars. The research results imply that the long-term benefits are substantially greater than the costs.

Preliminary Findings

The findings are organized into emergent themes which are consolidated into a shared essence.

Expectations

Coming into the program, the participants had different expectations. Participant 1 had access to students of previous TLDP sessions and this person's expectations were more general. This participant expected the program to **"*give me a little more guidance, a little more insight, a little more understanding, a little more knowledge or approach for how to deal with people*".** These expectations seem to be based on general knowledge and are not specifically tied to any particular experience other than improvement in general.

Participant 2, however, reported more-focused expectations. This person expected **"*a good opportunity to build on my skills and the fact that it is transportation and dealing with my job and what we are doing because for me, transportation is its own little set, there is not really anything like it".*** Participant 2 was also **"*hoping to make connections, number one".***

Both participants expected more students in the course. Participant 2 noted "***I was a little disappointed when I first got there because my expectation had been that it would be other people in the same position that I was and there are no other directors*".** Along the same lines, Participant 1 said **"*I probably was expecting more, more participants*"** and **"*I was looking for at least, maybe 15 or 20 people*" .**

Transformation

Both participants experienced transformative moments during the first seminar. This moment varied by participant, which is not surprising considering that seminar 1 consists of dozens of exercises. According to Participant 1, **"*the 'world of different' moment for me I think would be, I think it was on day 2 where we did the cost analysis."*** For Participant 2, it was the **"*group activity talking about transportation in general and… dispelling the myths."***

Assessment

Cohort size is the only weakness of the program and was mentioned in both interviews, for instance where Participant 1 said "***I probably was expecting more, more participants*".** The evidence suggests that the strengths of the program differ by participant. When asked about the impact of the first seminar, Participant 1 said **"*in those three days it was a world of difference. [spoken fast, excited] I came back to my current job now and I was like we need to do this, we need to do this*".** Participant 2 was given **"*a lot of things to think about in ways of communication and things like that… I did come out of it with a lot of new ideas*"** and **"*I feel like I came out with a lot of knowledge that I didn't have and new ideas to come back with and be able to implement*".**

Application

The reported workplace outcomes cluster around better communication skills for the participant who can then apply these skills toward establishing better workplace communication in general. Participant 1 noted **"*since I've came back and implement the little things what I learned in class, the communication is flowing better. It [TLDP] gave me the leadership tools to address it.*"**

Participant 2 said **"*I thought more about the communication and my wording and making sure that I was using positives, even though it might have been a negative situation- trying to use positive wording. I've thought about that and then just listening to some of the other ideas from other people"* and "*I came out with a lot …[of]… excitement* .**

In addition, both participants reported using the leadership and communication skills learned during the program outside of the work environment to help them address personal situations.

Essence

This phenomenological study suggests that the shared phenomenon or essence of the North Carolina Transportation Leadership Development Program experience from a student perspective is that students come in with different expectations, experience a transformative moment such as the **"world of difference"** moment noted by a participant, learn about becoming leaders and then apply these lessons to make improvements in both the work environment and their personal lives.

Limitations

- Small sample size (n of 2)
- First seminar only (TLDP consists of 2 seminars)
- Each cohort has unique characteristics
- Potential response bias
- Interview questions may not have allowed for negative input or general comments about the program