

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT: ASSUAGING UNCERTAINTIES THROUGH JOINING A LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The paper reviews some uncertainties experienced by a group of CEs, and how they are assuaged through their participation in an executive development (ED) programme. These uncertainties relate both to their involvement in the programme as such, particularly during their early days of membership, and to their everyday work experience. Based upon a critical review of the leadership/management development literature, we argue that this area has been addressed, at best, only tangentially. We put forward a new framework for reflecting upon and executing executive development, one which, *inter alia*, contrasts leader development/human capital with leadership development/social capital approaches.

Methodology

An in-depth, longitudinal case study of an ED programme undertaken by the authors, using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis.

Findings

Five main CE uncertainties were identified: knowledge, job/career, behavioural, personal, and contextual. The case study section of the paper outlines each of these uncertainties, and illustrates how they were being assuaged through the CE programme.

Research limitations/implications

The usual caveats apply about generalising from a case study. On the other hand, the paper presents a rare detailed ‘insider’ account of and reflection upon chief executives’ experience of an ED programme, situating it in the wider contexts of their work and anxieties.

Practical Implications

In the light of the uncertainties identified, a number of implications for the design and operation of executive development programmes are outlined and discussed.

Originality/value

New data is presented and analysed, linked to relevant themes in the ED/Leadership Development literatures

We would categorise this as a ‘Research Paper’.

KEYWORDS

Chief Executive; leadership and executive development; uncertainties; assuaging.

INTRODUCTION

The paper has two key objectives: to review and make visible the uncertainties experienced by a group of chief executives (CEs) participating in a Leadership Development (LD) programme, and, in particular, to evaluate how effective the latter is at assuaging these uncertainties. It is based on data collected from a research project examining LD programmes run by the North-East England branch of the UK Academy for Chief Executives (ACE). It draws in particular upon the more contextualised and nuanced work on LD which has been published in recent years, focusing on an aspect of the experience and concern of CEs and senior managers which is rarely, if ever, recognized, let alone addressed, in the ‘heroic leader’ literature and polemics, nor in academic work on the subject (see, for example, Grint, 2005; Storey, 2004): the uncertainties which these executives and managers experience in relation to their work (summarised in the next paragraph). This matter was not one which we explicitly raised in our interviews; nor were we looking for it through participant observation. Yet it emerged from our fieldwork as a key dimension of these people’s experience, and was an important influencing factor in them deciding to join ACE and participate in the local Branch. The ‘uncertainty issue’ has not surfaced, to the best of our knowledge, in the LD/ED literature (for that would be to admit that leaders are not necessarily or always the heroic, omniscient, confident, thrusting characters often portrayed there).

The paper builds on this insight by offering a corrective to the heroic view, contributing to the design and offering of ED programmes which recognize and build in means of addressing these uncertainties. CEs will always experience uncertainties in relation to their work, of course, but perhaps some of them can be assuaged, if not

eradicated, through appropriately designed programmes. At the same time, we found that at least some of these CEs, in the earlier period of their membership of ACE, were also uncertain about aspects of the LD programme upon which they had recently embarked, for example with regard to whether, and the extent to which, they would be 'welcomed' by the existing members; whether they would be able to contribute to discussions in a way which was viewed as meaningful and helpful; whether they could trust the other members with sensitive information. We found that the mode of LD offered by the ACE acted, over time, to assuage, if not indeed remove, these uncertainties, whilst at the same time, assuaging many of the CE's work-related uncertainties.

Whilst there is this lacunae with respect to executive/senior manager uncertainties in the LD literature, there are other cognisant literatures which do address (albeit often 'in passing') uncertainties, and we have found them helpful in framing, and acting as points of departure to, our research. We summarise these uncertainties as: developing knowledge and skills; career and job development; behavioural and relational; personal; networks/contextual. Following the literature review, we briefly outline the research project and ACE, provide a methodological note, present and analyse our findings, and offer a concluding discussion.

UNCERTAINTIES AND ANXIETIES IN EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

There are a number of ways of categorizing ED. Mumford (1987) distinguishes between 'unplanned accidental', 'planned on- the job', and 'planned or programmed' learning experiences occurring outside work. ED can involve formal education and training, conducted 'off the job' through short courses, qualification- based

programmes, and in-company training (Woodall and Winstanley, 1998). External programmes can bring specialist competence, a wider perspective, and up-to-date knowledge; internal programmes can help encourage team-building and collaboration, and link development to strategic goals. 'Off the job' methods include secondments, projects, coaching, mentoring, and international assignments, as well as self-managed learning through reading and e-learning. However, ED may require structured processes to help executives focus on learning, share lessons, and integrate these into existing personal and organizational knowledge/ competence bases (Hirst *et al*, 2004). There appears to be a move towards more experiential methods, such as outdoor development, action learning, coaching and mentoring (see, for example, Goodge, 1998; Thomson *et al*, 2000; Williams *et al*, 2003) to challenge participants' beliefs and develop their skills and knowledge. In addition, the focus of ED has increasingly shifted away from functional knowledge and skills to more strategic issues, such as leadership. In recent years governments have highlighted the need for improved leadership, and better LD, as keys to better economic performance (Gold *et al*, 2003; CEML, 2002). As a consequence, LD programmes have been set up in, for example, the National College for School Leadership and the NHS Leadership Centre.

We see uncertainty as inherent in the executive role, and also in ED, but this has been neglected in many studies of leadership. Uncertainty, vulnerability and risk are interrelated (Newell and Swan, 2000; Atkinson and Butcher, 2003), and in ED participants are uncertain as to what knowledge to acquire and how, what actions to take and when, who to work with over what, who to model oneself on and how, and where and with whom to network.

There have been several recent approaches to the issue of insecurity and uncertainty at work, especially in terms of links to identity and subjectivity (see, eg, Collinson,

2003). Insecurities can take different forms, intersecting in the reproduction of occupational selves and power relations as analysed by Foucault (1979), Rose (1999) and Hollway (1984). Iles (2007:101) argues that assessment and selection processes for employees 'seek to define, understand, assess and place them in terms of organisationally-defined critical qualities such as 'competences' or 'talents'....and constitute 'the moment when organisational restructuring meets and impacts on individuals '(Iles, 2007:98). Collinson (2003:529) argues that this 'growing interest in selves and subjects within the workplace has not always appreciated the analytical importance of insecurity for understanding the subjective power relations, practices and survival strategies of organisation'. Existential, social, economic, and/or psychological insecurities at work intersect, impact on the construction of workplace selves and power relations, and are linked to concepts of masculinity. Individuals may attempt to overcome these insecurities through the development of 'conformist', 'dramaturgical' and 'resistant' selves, and these attempts may have unintended and contradictory outcomes.

Our interest here is in the insecurities and anxieties- especially the knowledge/skill, career, behavioural, personal, and networking uncertainties—experienced by executives in their roles and in ED contexts, and how ED can address these. Other research has also looked at uncertainty and anxiety in terms of the role of emotions in learning and development. Vince (2002:79) argues that 'this emotional aspect of organizing is frequently difficult for individuals and groups to acknowledge and work with...anxiety may be provoked by having to say something difficult or challenging, by the effects of unwanted decisions, by the pressures of an unfamiliar task'(Vince, 2002: 78). Anxiety can bring about a 'strategic moment': it can be ignored or avoided, leading to denial or avoidance, defensiveness, resistance and willing ignorance; or it

can also be worked through, leading to new learning and insight.. This raises the question of what knowledge and skills need to be addressed in ED, and how ED can best do this.

Assuaging skills and knowledge uncertainties through ED

Many executives are recently-promoted or appointed into unfamiliar, difficult and challenging tasks. Garrett (1991:12) refers to the tensions and ‘nagging feelings and lack of knowledge as to what is competence at Director level’. However, the issue of what executive competence is, and how best to develop it, has only recently been addressed. In the 1980s, there was increasing recognition that *management* education and development (MD) in the UK was deficient in both quantity and quality (see, for example, Thomson *et al*, 2000). Competence-based models began to be developed, and MD was increasingly recognised as a significant lever of organizational transformation (Conger and Xin, 2000; Mumford *et al*, 2000). However, the focus was on MD, rather than ED or LD.

In our conception, ED involves the development of executives’ knowledge, skills, attributes and experience to enhance the performance of the CE/director role.

Evidence for the effectiveness of MD/ ED has however often been patchy; Thomson *et al* (2000) reported that MD had not often met its objectives, and that measures of its positive impact were often lacking.

Most evaluation studies have been based on interviews or surveys with the professionals responsible for those activities (Thomson *et al*, 2000; Russon and Reinelt, 2004), hence an impartial view seems unlikely. HRD manager respondents in the Thomson *et al* (2000) studies took a more positive view of MD in organizations

than managers on the 'receiving end', reporting that the priority given to MD had increased significantly and was expected to increase still more. MD ranged across all levels of management, not being reserved for 'high-flyers' only; interestingly however it was most emphasised at the junior level, with senior managers/executives being the group least likely to experience it.

'Consumer' respondents to Thomson *et al's* surveys, including AMBA members, reported low levels of satisfaction with organizational MD, but much on-going, personally-driven development. Organizations in general seemed to have only limited and weak policy frameworks for MD; low priority was given to MD, in contrast to the claims made by HRD managers. MD in general was not seen to fully reflect business strategy, often failing to meet its objectives or to have had a positive organizational impact.

Given this overall level of dissatisfaction with in-company MD, it is perhaps not surprising that much development was undertaken by respondents on their own initiative, outside employer provision, making use of a wide range of learning methods and displaying a willingness to make considerable personal investments in their own time, at their own expense. There was a demand for further development to be formally recognised in order to promote 'portability'. External courses and experiential learning were rated more highly than internal courses provided by the organization.

We next discuss the role of ED in executive career development, and the uncertainties and anxieties experienced in this area, as ED is often initiated to further wider career objectives, and organizations often initiate ED in response to new career paths.

Assuaging job/career uncertainties through ED

The traditional career perspective focuses on organizational efforts to develop and retain key employees through individual career plans: helping them identify personal drivers and values, develop networks, build transferable competencies and capabilities, and apply these to their personal and career development. Such career planning may often incorporate self-managed learning and may involve feedback to help tailor learning content and development processes to individual needs in flexible, relevant and responsive ways. However, these initiatives are often aimed at graduates and other new entrants, increasingly now under the banner of ‘Talent Management’ (Iles, 2007; Iles *et al*, 2006); their relevance to CEs is less obvious. Many approaches to careers were formulated in the mid-20th century, when the predominant assumption was of a steady upward or ‘vertical’ movement within a relatively stable hierarchy of jobs. This option never was available for CEs (albeit that there may be opportunities within multi-divisional/multi-site organizations by moving from the current location), and, in any event, many if not most of them work in unstable and regularly changing environments, all of which generate career unpredictability and uncertainty.

Careers now seem to be much less predictable, involving more crossing of functional, national and organizational boundaries, and more lateral movements. Individuals are now more likely to be seen as the agents of their own career; ‘employability security’, not employment security, is often seen as the driver of many careers (Kanter, 1989), involving the development of portable capabilities and career- enhancing networks (Altman, 1997). Thomson *et al* (2000) found that AMBA members reported a considerable degree of personal mobility, such as employment in many companies and anticipation of further moves across organizational, company, functional and skill-set boundaries. This does not necessarily mean that organizational career plans are no longer relevant in ED: a balance of shared responsibilities and joint activities

between the company and an individual is often advocated (see Thomson *et al*, 2000; Iles, 1997).

The above models are not necessarily all new- for example Hall (1976) was writing about 'protean careers' over thirty years ago. Doubts can also be raised as to how widespread the 'old' career model of 'employment security' actually was, as it excluded many categories of people, including most women, many professionals, unskilled manual workers, casual workers, and performers, as well as CEs (Jackson, 1997). In practice, 'employment security' contracts were often restricted to male managers and skilled, unionised staff in large private/ public sector bureaucracies. Similar doubts can be expressed as to how many people are now experiencing such 'new careers', but CEs are perhaps among the most likely. Nicholson (1997) argues that the career is not dead, but is undergoing transformation, given the widening diversity of career patterns and experiences. The contemporary career is becoming more varied and more difficult to manage for both individuals and organizations, perhaps especially for CEs, often the group least likely to benefit from development opportunities.

Career options for CEs are likely to remain unpredictable, given continual and disruptive changes in their business environment. It is likely to be increasingly difficult to manage and lead organizations effectively without the continuous development of CEs to help sustain the viability and capability of organizations (Jackson *et al*, 2003; McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004). However, to pre-empt our later case study analysis, it seems to us that many CEs will have to go 'external' to their organization for their ED, as many of them may feel unable to show/admit internally that they need ED. This raises the issue of behavioural and personal uncertainties in ED, to which we now turn.

Assuaging behavioural and relational uncertainties: learning from role models and peer groups in ED

Experiential learning may enhance self-confidence through feedback, the observation of others and through self-checking or 'self-monitoring' (Snyder, 1979, 1987) where people regulate their own behaviour and monitor its social appropriateness, using social comparisons, in order to be favourably perceived by others. One such experiential learning process is Action Learning, combining formal management training with learning from experience. Managers use events from their own organizations through 'action learning sets', and reflect on, critique and learn from such activity (see Conger, 2001; Tichy *et al*, 1992). This aims to stimulate them to think beyond their present jobs and focus on the challenges facing their business, in order to develop more general leadership skills and capabilities. Action learning may however work better for ED if structured opportunities for reflection are included (Hirst *et al*, 2004).

As Iles and Preece (2006) have pointed out, LD programmes are often *leader* development programmes, typically involving a mixture of competency models, psychometric assessment, emotional intelligence, 360 degree feedback, communication skills training, coaching, mentoring, motivational speeches and outdoor development. However, LD involves more than developing human capital or individual skills and intrapersonal competence. It also involves developing social capital, often conceptualised as "a set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them" (Fukuyama 1995: 16).

Social capital can play a significant role in employee development and talent retention (Leana & van Buren III, 1999; Seibert *et al*, 2001; Tempest *et al*, 2004). How social

capital influences organizational performance however remains under-researched. Executives and leaders can play key roles in creating environments which promote cooperation and trust among employees, providing opportunities for enhancing or depleting social capital. Over the past two decades, social capital has increasingly become the focus of attention among organizational theorists (Maak, 2007), and has attracted increasing interest within ED (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007; Gubbins & Garavan, 2005; Kessels & Poell, 2004).

Mentoring, where a more experienced manager/executive facilitates the learning and career development of a less-experienced mentee, appears to be growing in popularity, providing both psycho-social (for example, acceptance, encouragement) and career-facilitation benefits (for example, sponsorship, protection, exposure). Mentoring is oriented to support and can enhance the cognitive (for example, more sophisticated strategic representations) as well as the mutual trust, respect and commitment dimensions of social capital. Executive coaching usually involves the integration of assessment, challenge and support. If linked to 360 degree assessment, it has the potential to enhance both human and social capital by increasing both weak and strong network ties (Granovetter, 1973).

The above discussion of social capital raises the issue of trust in ED, to which we now turn.

Personal uncertainties: trust in ED

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) view social capital as having three dimensions: structural (social interactions), relational (rooted in networked relationships, such as trust and trustworthiness) and cognitive (resources embodied in shared representations

and collective meanings, such as cultures and shared visions based on common values). Trust can therefore be seen as an important aspect of organizational social capital (Atkinson and Butcher, 2003), encompassing not only a belief about the trustworthiness of fellow participants, but also a willingness to act on that belief in situations of uncertainty (McEvily *et al*, 2003).

Trust has become a 'hot topic' in various disciplines (Hoe, 2007), with some social theorists exploring the relative instability of societal bases of trust and its apparent erosion in modern Western societies (see, eg, Giddens, 1990, 1994, 2007) or its potential value as social glue (Fukuyama, 1995). Meanwhile, organization theorists have discussed its role in facilitating global alliances and inter-organizational networking (Newell and Swan, 2000), whilst others have talked about its erosion in organizations due to breaches of the 'psychological contract' (Robinson, 1996).

As Elangovan *et al* (2007: 5) have put it, 'There appears to be a general consensus that trust is important and useful in a range of organizational and inter-organizational activities such as leadership, team work, performance appraisal, labor relations, strategic alliances and negotiations'. We wish to argue here for its importance also in learning (Hoe, 2007) and, especially, in ED, as interpersonal trust can contribute to knowledge exchange and learning (Goris *et al*, 2003; Hoe, 2007).

Trust usually refers to an actor's willingness to be vulnerable under conditions of risk and interdependence (Mollering *et al*, 2004; Huemer *et al*, 1998; Rousseau *et al*, 1998). Expectations of trust can alleviate fears that other parties will act opportunistically (Bradach and Eccles, 1989) in situations involving personal conflict and outcome uncertainty (Nyhan, 2000), and reflect a willingness to accept the possibility of vulnerability in transactions. Affection-based trust reflects a relationship involving care and concern about a party's welfare, whilst cognition-

based trust highlights issues of integrity, fairness, and the extent to which an individual has confidence in the other party's reliability and competence (McAllister, 1995; Goris *et al*, 2003). For Atkinson and Butcher (2003) competence-based trust is largely impersonal and rational, whilst motive-based trust is largely interpersonal in nature, and more affective.

Dirks and Parks (2003) suggest that specifying the referent (that is, 'trust in whom?') is important, because trust in different referents may be due to different factors.

Lateral trust refers to relationships between the focal employee and other co-workers; vertical trust refers to employee trust of the immediate supervisor, subordinates, and senior management (McCauley and Kuhnert, 1992). The degree of trust associated with various parties in ED may vary; fellow-participants may be trusted more than facilitators, or vice-versa.

Trust can enrich relationships and foster cooperation and commitment (Connell *et al*, 2003; McAllister, 1995; Zand, 1997). Groups work more effectively together in an atmosphere of trust based on mutual commitments and stable long-term relationships (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Repeated inter-group interactions can help build trust, leading to the eventual sharing of knowledge and mutual learning. Iles and Yolles (2003) found that a British and a Czech university were more likely to learn from each other in developing business education programmes if they engaged in extensive communication, continuous interaction and collaborative negotiation. McElroy (2002) argues that trust can 'add value' in and between organizations by speeding up the transfer of information and the development of new knowledge. For Nyhan (2000), interpersonal trust is stronger when actors are confident that the other is competent and will act in a fair and ethical manner, support legitimate actions and not withhold knowledge or manipulate actions. Trust can help create the necessary commitment

and confidence in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge (Huemer *et al*, 1998). Knowledge processes involved in trusting relationships will tend to be informal (tacit) rather than structural (explicit), allowing the testing and verification of trust and greater mutual understanding. Interpersonal trust can promote informal/ tacit knowledge acquisition and dissemination among participants in ED. Without trust, employees can become defensive; actions need to be justified and backed up by data, inhibiting organizational learning (Costigan *et al*, 1998).

A further uncertainty in addition to anxieties about trust concerns access to another dimension of social capital, networks, which we discuss below.

Assuaging contextual uncertainties: gaining entry to networks and building social capital in ED

Networking involves investing in and developing social capital, gaining support and widening perspectives through exposure to others' thinking and the formation of commitments outside one's immediate work. Fostering stronger connections within social networks by developing environments that promote trust, rapport and goodwill among group members may yield positive outcomes for individuals, groups and organizations (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). Networking can help build peer relationships across functional areas, leading to the creation of additional social capital, if used for example in conjunction with feedback, coaching, and mentoring in ED. Day (2000: 582) sees LD as 'expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes'. Unlike 'leadership competencies', social capital cannot be regarded as a commodity, and one sole actor or 'leader' cannot have

'ownership rights'. ED therefore involves helping people to understand how to build relationships to access resources, coordinate activities, develop commitments and build social networks. In order to do this, leaders need to develop their understanding of themselves and their social and organizational communities.

Leadership can be seen as a social process engaging members of a community, an emergent property of social interaction in context. LD therefore involves using social and relational processes to help build commitments among members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1991), who may be internal and/or external to the organization, resulting in enhanced cooperation and resource exchange (Bourdieu, 1986).

One final observation to conclude this section: surprisingly little has been written on ED of CEs and other senior managers, despite the fact that in recent years have seen much more interest in leaders and LD. In our view, the deployment of ethnographic research methods will better inform our understanding of the above sorts of practices, using participant observation, diaries, and in-depth interviews over an extended time period to focus on executives' experience of and reflections upon ED. What is more, given that longer term, longitudinal and experiential approaches at the level of practice are more supportive of ED than the short-term, skills-based approaches commonly found in much MD/LD, the study of such processes is likely to benefit from in-depth, longitudinal and qualitative analyses which can draw out, *inter alia*, the uncertainties of CEs/senior managers and the ways in which ED might go some way to assuaging them. It is to an outline and analysis of such a study and ED programme that we now turn.

THE ACADEMY FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES

The primary data was gathered through a collaborative research project with the ACE, NE England Branch between July, 2002 and June, 2004. Membership is 'by invitation' only, and the Branch Chairs ensure that members' organizations are not in competition with each other. One-day meetings are held monthly, involving visiting 'Speaker' sessions in the morning and 'Issues' sessions in the afternoon, with the possibility of later one-to-one coaching sessions between the Chair and members if booked previously. Speaker sessions cover a range of topics, such as business strategy, marketing, and organizational change. In Issues sessions, members outline particular matters they want to air with the rest of the group; the ensuing discussion provides clarification and suggestions for action, with participants sworn to secrecy. Members use the coaching sessions on an 'as needed' basis. Once a year each Group also holds a two-day residential 'Retreat', allowing for extended presentations and discussions. Fuller details on the project and ACE are provided in Iles and Preece (2006).

METHODOLOGY

The authors held a number of meetings with the Branch Chair before data collection commenced, where the detailed form, timing, etc of our collaboration was discussed and agreed. Following this, the Chair outlined what was proposed to the members at one of their monthly meetings, seeking their agreement. He also proposed that one author be made an 'Honorary Member' for the duration of the research project, and this also received the members' approval.

Data were collected through three methods: overt participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis, outlined in summary form below.

Participant observation

As 'Honorary Member' of ACE early in 2003, one author was able to take up a 'participant as observer' (Gold, 1958) role when attending and taking part in the monthly meetings; that is the speaker and issues sessions. Hand-written notes were taken during the speaker sessions, covering such matters as the questions asked by members and responses offered by the speaker, other members and the Chair. This proved invaluable in helping to build up a degree of trust between the researchers and the members, and in extending our understanding of their work and personal interests, concerns and orientations. Discussions over lunch and tea/coffee breaks were also very helpful in this regard. It was not possible to take notes during the 'issues' sessions, owing to the highly confidential nature of what was being discussed: members would have noticed the researcher doing this and the relationship of trust (which we identified as an area of uncertainty linked to learning) could well have been jeopardized as a result.

Interviews

All the members during the time of our research were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, with the interviews being shared approximately equally between the authors. An interview pro forma was developed and employed (see Appendix 1), and anonymity was, of course, guaranteed. With permission, interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed and content analysed (permission was not

granted in one case, and hence detailed notes were taken instead). In total, this amounted to some twenty interviews, conducted at the member's place of work, and lasting between one and two-and-a-half hours.

The interview programme began in October, 2003, and was completed in October, 2004.

Documentary analysis

Honorary membership gave access to the ACE extranet and literature produced by both the ACE/NE and the national office, as well as to some internal documents. For reasons of confidentiality, much of this data cannot, of course, be reproduced or referred to in the paper, but it has formed part of our findings and hence influenced our reflections upon practice.

Data collected through participant observation and interviews were analyzed through an iterative process. For example, once two or three interviews had been transcribed and carefully read through the authors would meet to share and discuss their reflections upon what had been said. Whilst the interviews were being conducted and transcribed, data were also being collected via participant observation, and hence one of the authors was also able to offer his findings and reflections from that process. In this way, certain 'themes', such as uncertainties and trust, emerged during data gathering and analysis. We retained the same interview schedule throughout, but became more nuanced around and sensitive to certain issues/themes/matters such as these as they were alluded to by the members in response to our questions. We are, of course, unable to make claims about the generalizability of our findings in a 'representative' sense; however, we would argue that we are able to 'generalize to

theory rather than to populations’, based on the argument that ‘it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization’ (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 300).

Let us now move on to draw upon the data we gathered through the above methods regarding CE uncertainties. The letter in brackets at the end of each interview extract indicates a particular interviewee.

ASSUAGING UNCERTAINTIES THROUGH ACADEMY MEMBERSHIP

The uncertainties which we identified as being experienced by these CEs took five main forms: knowledge and skills, job and career, behavioural/ relational, personal, and contextual. The number of uncertainties experienced by a given CE varied across the group (some, especially those new to the role, typically experiencing all of them, whilst the ‘old sweats’ experienced fewer); also, many are closely inter-related and it is therefore rather arbitrary to separate them out in this way. Our focus is upon elaborating these uncertainties and illustrating how ACE membership helped to assuage them.

Assuaging knowledge and skills uncertainties: gaining new knowledge and sharing ideas and experiences

Many CEs voiced uncertainties over appropriate knowledge and skills, and how best to develop them. In the first interview extract below, reflection was being offered upon the ‘Speaker’ sessions. As with most members, these were seen as being effective in imparting new knowledge and information:

OK, there were two reasons to join: one was to keep learning and the second was to have a sort of sounding board...in most cases I found the quality of speakers has been good...most of it has been fresh and new and therefore stimulating, and I have been able to take ideas from it and put it into practice.(B)

With respect to session content, there was a preference for presentations mixing theory and practice. Members didn't want presentations skewed too much in the former direction as they would not then see them as having relevance to practice, but, on the other hand, they did want some theory, for then a) they felt they might be learning something new, b) it would be more than the speaker just relaying his/her reflections upon practice, c) if they chose to implement what the speaker was advocating, they would have a ready rationale to explain/justify this in their organizations.

He gave us a book, and [what] he was talking about was just so right for me at the time because it is about letting go and leadership, and so a lot of practical things that they are bringing to it. What is good about it is there is a lot of good theory there, but commonsense that comes through, and there are not things that are airy-fairy, complicated, that will take a lot of time to implement and nobody will take any notice. (J)

It is not necessarily that 'solutions' to some of the indeterminacies and challenges faced by the members are offered, but often that the sessions help them to clarify their thinking, identify courses of action, and reassure them that they have chosen the 'correct' course of action:

You actually get a different perspective – what you see as a problem, others see as a great opportunity, and they challenge what you are thinking, and sometimes when you are in it you don't 'see the wood for the trees'. They don't provide a solution, but they set you on a path which gives you the possibility of finding a solution. (I)

What I get out of it more is maybe reassurance if you like - you put your issues to people and it reassures you that you are going down the right path. And people think 'Yeah, that is what you should be doing - that is the way of tackling it'. (E)

This sharing of ideas and experiences also takes place on a much more informal basis:

Yes there is a team spirit there. I do pick up the 'phone to others and talk through particular issues...it has given me another sort of drive, another set of views altogether, a new set of people, completely different outlook on their life and their business, and that is refreshing. (J)

Sometimes I got more out of talking to one or two of the guys over a coffee and a 10 minute chat, which was very informal rather than a big issue session. (K)

Members not only gained new knowledge, perspectives and reassurance in terms of *content* (marketing, finance, decision-making, etc), but also a *processual* appreciation about what is the core indeterminacy in organizations: people. This came about through the Issue, One-to-One and Speaker sessions (a member commented of the

latter: 'I think the most common theme has been how people work, how to utilise the latest theory, how to develop people, how to develop yourself). The following comment is illustrative:

I think what it is doing is ...helping me to become more professional and more focused, and understand the difference between how the culture can change without you doing anything, and change for the worse unless you reinforce that culture. So there is lots of best practices that I have picked from the Academy. (G)

Assuaging job and career uncertainties: Identifying and choosing courses of action

These executives experience a number of job/ career uncertainties in the course of their work, and Academy participation helped in coping and dealing with them. Examples include how to present and develop themselves, and how to recruit, retain and develop staff:

Part of what I got out [of membership] was seeing how people approach business, how they project themselves...you learn that they are having problems with getting staff, that they have internal problems with managers, and we all have the same problems in so many diverse businesses...And that is quite reassuring...they are still having the same ongoing problems as we encounter, which comforts me a little bit. (L)

...one of the interesting themes that has come out of the Academy is ... you go into these things and certainly in the back of my mind, from a personal

perspective, I'm not entirely sure what to do, what I ought to do next, and what do I want to do afterwards. (E)

This sharing of uncertainties can be seen as a form of *personal* development, but is also subsequently transmutable into *organization* development. What is more, it is unlikely that these people would feel able to surface such uncertainties through a more traditional mode of personal/career development ('Leader Development').

It's quite a strong cohesive group... We are almost at the point where we can almost say anything to each other and we won't take it the wrong way. It will be constructive – we might not like what we hear but it will be constructive... Usually, of course, people in positions like this don't have anyone they can talk to, so, surprisingly enough, you can't talk to your colleagues because there might be issues that affect the business or personal issues you don't want to discuss. So... for the business they [the fellow ACE members] act as non-exec's... they are very, very different people in that group, and that is a strength as well. You have all different sorts of perspectives – doesn't always give you the answer, but it makes you think. (J)

There is overlap here with what we have labelled 'behavioural/ relational uncertainties', and it is to an elaboration of these that we now turn.

Assuaging behavioural/ relational uncertainties: learning from role models and peers

The way in which the following recently-joined member talked about why he had joined the Academy can be read as an intention to conduct an ethnographic study of the behaviour and presentation of self of the more senior members:

You can talk in confidence to a group of people...I assumed that there would be people there who would be much more experienced than me. I want to learn from that...to develop an understanding of the place of the chief executives, how they deal with issues, how they behave, what language they use, and the way they approach these things ...This was my attitude- to really latch onto their coat tails and see what they do and how they work, what has made them successful. (L)

This comment can be read in two main ways:

(i) a wish to 'capture the act', that is the mode of behaviour, dress code, language-use, etc, of these CEs in order to self-consciously emulate it. If we use a theoretical lens which sees these executives reflexively adopting a particular disposition, then it can be argued that they are adopting a dramaturgical, social constructionist disposition.

(ii) attributing the behaviour, language-use, etc of these CEs to 'how things are out there' in an objectivist way, and then reflexively examining oneself to see the extent to which one possesses these features, hence where any 'gaps' might lie, leading onto an attempt to fill the gaps.

It is difficult to decide which approach was being adopted; however we think it more likely that it was the latter- take another extract from the interview:

I didn't think that the academic element of it was the identifier between being successful and not. Definitely reassured me that it was down to people skills, determination and the will to succeed, that sort of thing, coupled with common

sense as well. I felt that I gauged myself quite well against these other people...it is a safe environment where you can question yourself and say 'Well, OK, am I that good, am I in the right job, am I capable of carrying this off?' ...'Am I holding my company back, am I driving my company forward?' It was all those sort of questions that you won't want to say in front of your peers that you could explore in that environment. (L)

This member clearly recognized that there is no such thing as 'one best way' with respect to CE behaviour, he had in effect adopted a 'contingency' perspective on the matter:

There were several people there who you held in very, very high regard, the likes of [X], great guy, come through the 'hard knock' school of learning, there by determination and hard work...obviously not the 'polished article', not the stereotypical 'pinstripe suit' chief executive- but he is very successful at what he does. And you start looking at these people and going 'OK, well he is in a particular mould, if he did it ...the stereotypical way with the pinstripe suit and the suave and the polish, would he be any better or worse at what he does?' ...What it gave me is the confidence in myself that I am what I am...because sometimes you wonder 'Well, OK, if I got a Masters, would that give me that edge? If I went and changed my accent and got a posh accent, is that what people are looking for in a Chief Executive?' They are all different is probably what I took most out of there- you don't necessarily need to fit into the mould. (L)

For this relatively new CE, then, behavioural/ relational uncertainties relating to the role had been assuaged through observing and listening to more senior CEs in the group, and the range of behaviours and utterances he found displayed there had reassured him that he did not have to conform (as against display) to a particular ‘CE style’ as a necessary condition for successful performance in the role.

Assuaging personal uncertainties: developing trust in ED

Being able to share a complex/difficult issue in confidence with people who one can trust and who are unconnected with one’s company can be valuable and ‘therapeutic’ in its own right:

I got more benefit when I really had an issue...I came to an ugly patch where I was having a big fall out with another executive director- we were into an ‘email situation’, and I was really up against it. (C)

Even when one does not have a burning issue to discuss, learning can still be taking place though hearing about others’ experiences and responses:

...everybody comes up with ideas, and sometimes they are very refreshing ideas you hadn’t thought of...it is listening to others, it is an awareness of ‘Well I must remember not to go there’ type-of-thing, or sometimes you think ‘that could happen to us because I didn’t realise I was doing something similar to what they are doing’. (H)

Quite often, what is being discussed at ACE meetings (even when it is not an Issue session) is highly confidential, and members feel unable to discuss them openly and in

detail with work colleagues. This appears to be linked to uncertainties about which course of action to take: they do not wish to display this uncertainty to work colleagues, as they want to portray an image of themselves as knowledgeable, decisive and confident. As one CE commented:

...when we had an issue, I felt quite comfortable raising it with the people in the group, and obviously the issue sessions worked better with time in a group where you are more comfortable, where you know you have gone through the boundaries, you have got the trust element build up. (A)

Three particular aspects of the ACE mode of LD are key here: the selection/invitation process, which ensures that each Group does not have members from competing companies; the requirement of total confidentiality in the 'Issue' sessions; and the cohesiveness of the Groups, built up over a period of time through the monthly meetings and other, typically more 'informal', communication and interaction. This has generated a situation where a high degree of trust exists between members and between members and the Chair. As a member commented:

There is no question that in order to have that frank exchange of views you really have got to trust and have that level of mutual respect, and I think that there is no question that that part of the format is very valuable. (A)

These CEs, then, were looking for reassurance that they were doing the 'right' things in the 'right' way, and participation in the Academy was providing this reassurance.

Assuaging contextual uncertainties: gaining entry to networks

Reassurance and the assuaging of uncertainties about aspects of the external environment in which their organizations are located can come about through another route linked to ACE membership- invitations to external events, for example through the Branch Chair:

Certain things exposed us to different levels, mainly via [a Branch Chair], in the diplomatic circles that he is in...it is a whole different process that you didn't know a lot about unless you were part of it. So we went to the consulate ball and met various people, and what was reassuring is that there is a whole different circle out there...Reassurance is probably the main word, in that I didn't know how good or bad I was...as a benchmark [against] other people.

(E)

New external- organization business contacts are also made through other members. Rather surprisingly, for example, it had not always proved easy for some of them to make key contacts with regional governmental bodies:

It [ACE membership] has proved extremely helpful on another level, and that is networking... one thing you have got in that group [is] people who have a very strong set of contacts, and I was able to get contacts in various associations that I would not have been able to do. I know that 'cause I tried... we have even started doing it as a Group now, so the Group itself will want to meet up with other people and make their views known...It's almost started acting as an entity on its own. (J)

The Group had, indeed, over time come to act collectively in expanding its and individual member's contacts and networks in furtherance of their interests. They (not

the Chair), for example, had invited influential people from the region to address the Group:

X [a leading member] of [the Regional Development Agency] came to see us... which was brought about by the Group using its position as the Academy and [one of the Group members] on the RDA Board arranging for [X] to come to speak to us ...I made [him] aware of construction issues, and I got a 'phone call from him and I went to see him... it raised the agenda, and from there I met [another senior member of the RDA]. I do have contacts now within [the RDA] at the highest level. (F)

The Chair had already been inviting such people to the Speaker sessions, but here we see how the members themselves had come over time to take such networking initiatives on their own and/or the group's behalf.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The uncertainties experienced by CEs in the course of their work and in ED programmes have not been captured in the literature to date, in part because of the methodological and research methods commonly employed by people working in this area: briefly, there has been only limited use of longitudinal, processual, case study methodologies utilizing intensive and extensive interviewing and participant observation of LD programmes 'in action'. It is also, perhaps, to do with the typically more individualistic/psychological orientation of much of this research, which often neglects action in its social and organizational contexts. Yet, there is a need to recognize these various uncertainties, both as an aspect of the CE organizational

experience, and for the purpose of designing and operationalizing LD initiatives for such people.

We have identified five such uncertainties (there may well be more): knowledge, job/career, behavioural/ relational, personal, and contextual. What is more, if the focus is upon LD and social capital, then it is crucial in our view to take cognizance of and address the issue of 'trust'-both between the CEs and the trainers/facilitators, and, if other CEs are involved, within the CE group itself.

An important issue for further exploration is how to conceptualise and understand the responses to uncertainty made by CEs. In our study, it appeared that they were engaging at times in 'survival practices' (Collinson (2003) to protect and secure themselves in uncertain contexts, where (both as CEs and as ED participants) they were 'under surveillance'. From a Foucauldian perspective, this produces disciplined and 'conformist' selves through various processes of 'identity regulation'. Iles (2007: 101) sees assessment:

as part of the government of organisations and the regulation of individuals, including their subjectivity The focus is on the role of the appraiser/ assessor as both regulator and judge/confessor, and the appraised/ assessed as an object of power/knowledge, as well as a self-regulating agent. The assessment/ appraisal instrument is seen as part of a technology of power and regulation.

One might see the facilitators of ED programmes, as well as fellow-participants, as both regulators and as judges/confessors, and participants as both objects of power/knowledge and as self-regulating agents. From this perspective, ED programmes might also be seen as part of a technology of power and regulation.

One can interpret some of our CEs' responses in this light—for example, what the 'right' behaviour, 'correct' language, and 'appropriate' style might be as a CE, who was the 'right model' to imitate, and what were the 'appropriate' networks to access. Such concerns are evident in the self-monitoring and impression-management behaviours manifested by many participants. One example of a 'conformist self' is the pursuit of a successful career, and we have identified this area as a key source of anxiety/uncertainty which participants seek to assuage through ED. Identity construction and protection are clearly as much concerns of executives as for the subordinated employees more typically studied from this perspective.

However, this is not the only possible interpretation. It is not just surveillance systems, but also ED programmes that make individuals increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects under the gaze of others (in the case of our CEs, not so much to authorities as peers and facilitators). As Collinson (2003) points out, this does not necessarily just produce 'conformist selves'; it may produce 'dramaturgical selves', increasingly skilled manipulators and impression-managers of self, reputation, 'brand' and image in the eyes of significant others. CEs can become increasingly competent at 'choreographing' their own behaviours, practices and actions in reaction to monitoring in ED, in an 'ambiguous and shifting amalgam of compliance and opposition' (Collinson 2003: 539). At times, our CEs also constructed 'resistant selves' to express their discontent with aspects of the ED programme—for example, they would criticise the 'inflexible' or 'dogmatic' style of a chair, suggest amendments to the programme, and take the initiative in inviting certain speakers.

The literature on leaders/manager and LD, whilst it addresses matters such as knowledge acquisition, careers, behaviour, and networking, does not explicitly or adequately address the sort of uncertainties which our CEs feel and experience in the

course of their work and in relation to participating in LD programmes. It seems to us that there is more chance of this occurring, and of these uncertainties explicitly surfacing and being assuaged, where LD programmes take more open, emergent and collectives form, targeting both human capital/leader development and social capital/leadership development. In our view, further research should address how such ED may be a mechanism through which investments in social capital, including in trust and in networks, can be translated into positive benefits and outcomes for organizations, teams and individuals.

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

A. BIOGRAPHICAL/ORGANIZATIONAL DETAILS

Qualifications, previous work experience, present job, etc.

B. BEFORE/ON JOINING ACE

Why did they join?

Their views on management gurus and academic literature/themes

What were their expectations of the ACE, and what they would get out of it? How does this articulate with their actual experience to date? Likewise for their objectives.

C. ACE IN PRACTICE

The learning experience, including speakers, one to one sessions, issue sessions, ACE intranet. What do they get out of the sessions they attend, including from each other and from [the Chair]? Anything else they would like which is not currently provided? Why little note taking? Would they like reading lists? The tapes...

The learning materials, regional relevance, and development potential

Added value to direct and indirect beneficiaries, including cascading to other organizational/network members. Knowledge/technology transfer issues.

Evaluation of the 'leadership' dimension as distinct from other elements of the programme

What is gained in terms of personal development? And how is it linked to business development?

To what extent do they feel they are shaping the ACE, North East? Their views of ACE nationally and locally.

Which particular topics 'grab' them and why?

Their use of IT, including the national ACE website/messages.

Do they have a personal development plan (or similar)? If not, why not? If yes, details please.

D. DISSEMINATION

Implementation within their organization

Skills and knowledge acquired

To what extent do they engage in lifelong learning, and to what extent is this due to ACE membership/inputs? What contributes to/sparks this?

How do they and others translate their learning into positive organizational and individual action?

Links between the learning process and corporate/divisional/workplace advantage?

New links opened up for beneficiaries? Eg they become more aware of regional, commercial, professional, academic opportunities.

Any moves in the Groups to a) learning processes and pathways, b) personal responsibility for learning, c) 'widening', d) engagement/re engagement with

learning, e) links between peer group learning and competitive advantage, f) 'value for money'.

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