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Authentic leadership and mindfulness development through action learning

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to evaluate a three-year training program based on action learning principles with regard to its effectiveness in fostering authentic leadership (AL) and mindfulness among the participants.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were obtained using a mixed-method design. Quantitative data were collected using a quasi-experimental sequential cohort design with comparison group, in which 143 participants responded to a self-evaluation questionnaire up to six times over a three-year period. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 24 managers.

Findings – The results indicate that, as participants evolved through the leadership development program, self-reports of AL and mindfulness increased significantly and linearly as determined using repeated measures ANOVA, paired *t*-tests, and content analysis of interviews.

Practical implications – The results suggest that a leadership development program based on action learning principles can foster the development of AL and mindfulness. The core elements of action learning (i.e. working on real problems, gaining new insights in a supportive and confrontational environment of one's peer) appear to be key to bringing about real changes in the behavior of participating managers and maximizing the chances of generating lasting effects.

Originality/value – This is the first longitudinal study to demonstrate that the development of mindfulness and AL – which calls for internalization of attitudes and behaviors – can be fostered by a leadership development program. The question of whether AL can be developed through planned interventions is paramount for advancing theory and research on AL.

Keywords Authentic leadership, Trigger events, Leadership development, Mindfulness, Action learning

Paper type Research paper

A growing number of authors have argued that the adoption of an authentic leadership (AL) style – characterized by transparent intentions and coherence between espoused values and actions undertaken – is needed to achieve sustainable business performance (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Indeed, the unique stressors facing organizations throughout the world today call for a renewed focus on what constitutes genuine leadership and on “restoring confidence, hope and optimism; being able to rapidly bounce back from catastrophic events and display resiliency; helping people in their search for meaning and connection by fostering a new self-awareness; and genuinely relating to all stakeholders” (p. 316).

Although exercising AL clearly involves the manager's personal skills, it appears that, despite their importance, such skills are largely ignored by academic training programs, or otherwise addressed with a largely theoretical approach that does not



allow for the sort of feedback needed between practice and reflection, making it difficult to acquire and develop these critical skills. Several recent studies have suggested that leadership training programs would be more effective if they took place over a longer period of time and included seminars, planned trigger events and individual coaching (Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007). The principles of action learning set out by Marquardt *et al.* (2009) appear to be particularly applicable to a program designed to develop such leadership. To our knowledge, no studies to date have assessed the ability of management training programs to foster the development of AL, and none that have investigated whether participation in such a program is associated with the development of mindfulness, a variable theoretically associated with this leadership style (Goldman Schuyler, 2010). In the current context in which firms invest massively in their leaders' skill development, this study aims to ascertain the effectiveness of a leadership development program based on action learning principles with regard to its ability to foster AL behaviors and, by so doing, to expand our knowledge of leadership skill development.

Theoretical framework

Authentic leadership

Although the notion of authenticity has been around for centuries, the concept of AL appeared in the academic literature only in the 2000s, with the birth of the positive psychology movement (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). AL is increasingly emerging as an integrative concept in the literature on positive organizational behavior, ethical leadership, and transformational leadership. Papers from the popular press and from academic journals have contributed to a progressive clarification of what it means to be "an authentic leader." Initially, Luthans and Avolio (2003) defined AL as "a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (p. 243).

Nonetheless, one of the difficulties related to studying AL is the absence of a single definition. In line with the diversity of perspectives on authenticity, we chose to rely on the perspective put forward by Gardner *et al.* (2005), as it integrates views derived from multiple theorists, primarily from social psychology. This perspective "focuses explicitly on the development of authentic leaders and authentic followers, which make it state-like and ultimately something one can develop in leaders" (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, p. 93). This conceptualization involves actors on various levels, namely the leader in question, followers and the organization. In this study, we address the first level, that is, the individual perspective of the leader, which is based on a set of four individual components used in a growing number of empirical studies (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, 2010). These components are: first, self-awareness, i.e., knowledge of one's strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs and emotions, as well as their impact on others; second, relational transparency, i.e., revealing information, thoughts and sincere emotions to others; third, balanced treatment of information, i.e., unbiased openness to differing perspectives on oneself and questioning of one's positions; and fourth, an internalized moral perspective, i.e., a process of self-regulation guided by moral values and standards forming the basis for decision making and undertaking action.

The robustness of this four-factor conceptualization has been validated by Walumbwa *et al.* (2008, 2010). Their results indicate that despite the expected existence of correlations between AL and transformational and ethical leadership, these

correlations are not high enough to indicate that the concepts are redundant. These studies by Walumbwa and colleagues have also shown that AL behaviors exhibited by the supervisor are positively associated with supervisor-rated organizational citizenship behavior and work commitment and employee satisfaction with supervision, as well as employee job satisfaction and performance. In short, although some results suggest that training managers to exercise AL can provide organizational benefits, no research has yet examined the ability of training programs to foster its development.

Can authentic leadership be developed?

According to Avolio and Gardner (2005, p. 322), "AL development involves complex processes, and [...] it is unlikely to be achieved simply through a training program." Indeed, the very nature of such leadership calls for internalization of attitudes and behaviors, such as time management or even charisma, that – to be considered authentic – cannot simply be imitated or reproduced (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012). Cooper *et al.* (2005) suggest that planned interventions would be more effective in developing AL if they took place over an extended period of time and included seminars, planned trigger events and individual coaching. The interaction between the trigger events, initiated by a leadership development program, and reflection about them, through coaching, would be key to bringing about real changes in behavior. Compared to short, intense training programs, this type of training structure would maximize the chances of generating lasting impacts on managers. This alternation between action and reflection is at the foundation of action learning, a widely used intervention for leadership development (Revans, 1982).

Action learning. Dilworth and Willis (2003) defined action learning as "a process of reflecting on one's work and beliefs in the supportive/confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business and community problems in real time" (p. 11). Marquardt *et al.* (2009) identify six necessary components of action learning: an important problem or project; a diverse group; insightful questioning and reflective listening; taking action on the problem; a commitment to learning; and an action learning coach (a process facilitator).

Revans (1982) emphasized the need for conceptual and practical balance between action and learning through reflection. As mentioned by Cho and Egan (2009), "an unbalanced approach to action learning is not productive, as action without learning is unlikely to return fruitful results and learning without action does not facilitate change" (p. 435). The literature review conducted by those authors indicated that the majority of action learning programs that had been studied up until that time were unbalanced, mainly learning oriented, and were more often used for personal development than for organizational growth. The authors asserted that action learning could not become a truly relevant tool for organizations unless such studies more clearly examine the success, learning and performance outcomes of action learning interventions.

A quick review of the typology developed by Fisher *et al.* (2000) will help explain the nature of the learning fostered by action learning. According to these authors, experience can be conceptualized as occurring in four territories on which the individual's attention can be focussed to detect and attempt to balance any incongruities. The goal of action learning is to gradually develop the ability to interweave three feedback loops (or learning loops) among the four "territories of experience," leading to progressively more enlightened levels of action (see Figure 1).

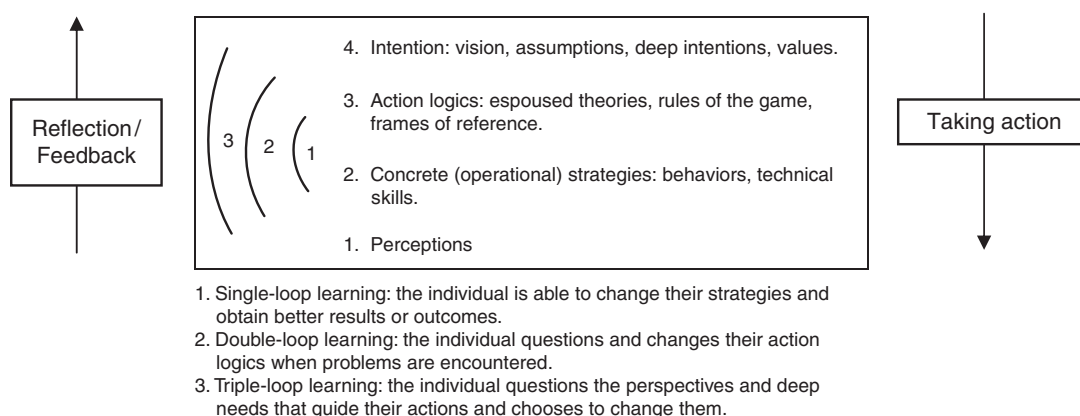


Figure 1.
Learning loops
across the four
territories of
experience

Source: After Fisher *et al.* (2000), based on Argyris and Schön (1996)

In line with this, the perspective on AL developed by Gardner *et al.* (2005) suggests that positive growth in leaders is stimulated by trigger events, defined as marked changes in the individual's situation that facilitate personal growth and development. In organizational settings, trigger events can occur in situations that challenge the leader's skills and require unconventional solutions. As DeRue and Wellman (2009) mention, experiences that present developmental challenges provide a platform on which individuals can try out new behaviors and reframe their old ways of thinking and acting. That said, it is suggested that a proactive training strategy can be adopted by planning trigger events geared toward developing AL (Thomas, 2008). Since what works as a trigger event for one person might not work for another, making it difficult to specifically plan appropriate triggers, Baron and Parent (2015) suggest that it may be more effective to think in terms of establishing training practices (experiments/activities/projects) that favor the occurrence of multiple events that are conducive to gaining new insights into how participants interact with their environment as human beings and leaders.

In keeping with the action learning model, events are considered triggers when they permit double-loop or triple-loop learning. Indeed, by using action learning strategies that combine action (through experiments) and reflection (through coaching), participants may be able gain insight about themselves in their role as leader, for instance with regard to their mental models, intentions or action logics. An enhanced sense of internal coherence, characteristic of AL, would thus be made possible. Among the various components of action learning, the coaching offered by facilitators and members of the group (in dyads or as the whole group) appears to be a key element. In addition to promoting positive behavioral changes, such coaching fosters integration of the new insights triggered by experimentation within the training program (Cooper *et al.*, 2005).

In summary, very few studies have empirically evaluated leadership development using longitudinal methodologies and none have examined the ability of training programs to foster the development of AL (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). Since most research to date has examined the "how" of action learning, more studies are needed to elaborate on action learning outcomes (Cho and Egan, 2009), especially using quantitative or mixed experimental designs. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Participation in a leadership development program based on action learning principles is positively associated with AL development.

Mindfulness

Lahey *et al.* (2008) suggest that people who are highly authentic function in a relatively autonomous fashion, with relatively low levels of ego involvement. In line, Fry and Kriger (2009) put forward a theory of leadership based on being, "that goes beyond current theory which emphasized having and doing." On a five-level ontological scale of being, they placed AL at the third level, "the level of the soul." They suggest that the greatest obstacle to experiencing reality at this level is over-emphasis on the thinking mind, which creates an opaque screen of concepts, labels, judgments and definitions that blocks all true relationship, and that this over-emphasis decreases when attention is focussed on the present.

These characteristics suggest that mindfulness – which consists of putting aside personal filters to establish direct contact with experience and responding to that experience in a less-automatic, more-flexible way (Brown and Ryan, 2003) – is likely to be related to authenticity. According to Lahey *et al.*, although authenticity and mindfulness share certain elements (i.e. awareness, unbiased processing), the two constructs differ in many significant ways. First, mindfulness refers to awareness and attention to one's immediate experience, whereas the authenticity construct refers to awareness of aspects of one's self (i.e. values, beliefs, emotions, etc.). Similarly, in the mindfulness construct, unbiased processing refers to not filtering experience, experiencing each moment as it occurs without making judgments, while in the authenticity construct, unbiased processing refers to treating evaluative information objectively, without minimizing or exaggerating its implications. Action learning appears to draw heavily on these two key characteristics of mindfulness. In action learning programs, participants alternate between practice (involving awareness of immediate experience) and reflection (involving unbiased processing). By so doing, they develop their capacity to observe themselves interacting with others; to modulate, in the present moment, the attitudes and behaviors they want to change; and to try out new ways of being and acting.

While the preceding description shows that AL and mindfulness are closely related concepts, to our knowledge, no empirical study has demonstrated an association between them, nor whether leadership development programs can help develop mindfulness. This led us to formulate the following two hypotheses:

H2. Participation in a leadership development program based on action learning principles is positively associated with greater mindfulness.

H3. Mindfulness is positively associated with AL.

Method

Research setting and leadership development program

This study is based on data collected over three years from a sample of managers enrolled in a training program given by a Canadian management consulting firm. The program lasts three years, with 15 days of training each year (five consecutive days every four months, for a total of 45 days of training). On average, 20 managers from various public and private organizations enroll in the program each year. The training sessions for the three cohorts (first-, second- and third-year participants) are held concomitantly at a retreat location.

The pedagogic approach of the program, led by two facilitators for each cohort, alternates between theoretical content (20 percent) and experiments/activities/applications (80 percent). Specifically, the goal of the first year is primarily to develop

self-awareness (e.g. of one's values, emotions, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, and effect on others) through experiments involving the life histories of the participants, their parental authority figures, and their personal and professional challenges. The goal of the second year is to develop the ability to have impact through action (group self-awareness, transposing that self-awareness into action with others, relational transparency, ability to seek desired feedback, openness, impact and influence). Finally, the goal of the third year is greater awareness of how to assume leadership of a group in an authentic and motivating fashion (e.g. acting with courage while remaining connected with one's self, assuming leadership while remaining open, the ability to rally others around inspiring projects). This developmental sequence is in line with Lord and Hall (2005) proposition that as leaders develop their identities expand in focus from individual to include relational and then collective levels. To support such development, each participant receives nine structured peer coaching sessions throughout each program year, both during and between the training sessions, building on an individual development plan prepared in consultation with the participant's immediate supervisor.

An exhaustive description of the characteristics of this specific program, and how they activate three distinct phenomena supporting the individual development process, is presented in Baron and Parent (2015). Using an approach based on grounded theory, the authors first identified a clamp effect, in which certain aspects of the training program helped put pressure on the participants to address their leadership issues and progressively take action. The elements of the program that created a sense of obligation to take action included activities constantly focussed on development issues; belonging to a learning community that acts as a sort of guard, making sure that each participant progresses in keeping with their own development issue; and making commitments, which may be formal (e.g. signed personal development plan), or informal (e.g. simply having others be witnesses to their intentions regarding their development).

The clamp effect is reinforced by a second phenomenon called the safety-net effect, which helps reduce the participants' perception of the risks associated with various program activities. Two types of factors were responsible for this effect, the first relating to the isolated training setting (e.g. a physically distant location that decreased the perception of risk associated with experimentation and favored formation of close and deep relationships) and the second to the creation of a work environment that is conducive to development (e.g. supportive climate, trust in others and confidence in the program structure).

The third and final phenomena identified by Baron and Parent is the organizational simulation effect, which refers to the incorporation into the training program of activities that reproduce a management environment, including elements related to both the physical environment (e.g. running a meeting with an agenda and objectives to be met) and the psychological environment (e.g. deadlines promoting stress and conflict). Some characteristics of these organizational simulations favor the emergence of complex and animated situations that are conducive to learning. Together, these three phenomena clearly correspond to the core elements of action learning reported by Dilworth and Willis (2003): working on real problems (i.e. organizational simulation effect) and gaining new insights in a supportive (i.e. safety-net effect) and confrontational (i.e. clamp effect) environment of one's peer.

Research design and samples

A mixed-method design was used in this study. First, quantitative data were collected using a quasi-experimental sequential cohort with comparison group. This type of approach, which has rarely been used to study leadership development (Ployhart *et al.*, 2002),

makes it possible to use treatments of different intensity levels for different groups of participants, while the use of a comparison group is an excellent way to control for measurement effects.

The participants were French-Canadian middle managers who had voluntarily signed up for the leadership development program ($n = 99$). To be eligible for the program, participants must have already completed a prerequisite one-week program on management soft-skills. Our final sample was composed of 93 managers (38 women, 55 men). The average age was 43, 83 percent had a university-level education and the average time as a manager was 10.1 years when beginning the program. They were surveyed twice a year (January and September), and were followed from one to three years between 2010 and 2012. Each time the author went to the training site to collect data, three cohorts were present. From one year to the next, the third-year participants would leave (having completed the program) to be replaced by a new cohort beginning their first year. In total, data were collected from five cohorts (one cohort for the entire program, and four cohorts for one or two years). On the fourth day of the first week of training, the participants completed instruments to measure AL and mindfulness. Eight months later, a second round of data collection covering AL and mindfulness was done.

In parallel with this, data were collected from a comparison group made up of managers who had participated in the prerequisite one-week program over the last five years. An e-mail invitation to complete an online questionnaire was sent to 490 former participants. In total, 92 people answered the first questionnaire, of which 50 also completed a second one ten months later.

Second, semi-structured interviews lasting from 50 to 100 minutes were conducted with 24 participants, as a way to collect narratives documenting the development of their AL skills. At the time of the interview, the participants had completed one, two, or three years of the program. The following are key interview questions posed to generate the data: have you had one or more experiences in the context of the training program that significantly affected:

- (1) Your knowledge of yourself as a leader?
- (2) Your openness to others or how you respond to the opinions of others as a leader?
- (3) The way you act and make decisions as a leader?
- (4) How you show your emotions to others or say what you really think, in the context of your leadership role?

To ensure the reliability of the qualitative findings of the study, the interviews with the participants were recorded and transcribed in their entirety, and the transcriptions were then analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify emerging themes.

Measures

Authentic leadership. AL was measured using the AL questionnaire (Avolio *et al.*, 2007). This 16-item questionnaire (e.g. "As a leader, I demonstrate beliefs that are consistent with actions") uses a five-point Likert scale (0-4). As has been done in previous studies that found that first-order factors failed to add any meaningful incremental validity beyond that of the shared core higher factor (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, 2010), the author chose to use the general factor in the analysis. The α coefficients were stable across measurements (from 0.81 to 0.86).

Mindfulness. The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale was used to measure mindfulness (Brown and Ryan, 2003). This 15-item questionnaire (e.g. “I find myself doing things without paying attention”) uses a six-point Likert scale (1-6) and yielded high validity scores in its validation study. The α coefficients were 0.82 (before) and 0.84 (after).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Before testing our hypothesis, we first tested for significant differences between the managers enrolled in the five cohorts and the comparison group. There were no statistically significant differences between groups with regard to age ($F(5, 129) = 1.063$, $p = \text{ns}$), education ($\chi^2(15) = 22.40$, ns) or number of years as a manager ($F(5, 130) = 0.735$, $p = \text{ns}$). Also, initial levels of authenticity ($F(2, 54) = 2.31$, $p = \text{ns}$) and of mindfulness ($F(2, 54) = 2.31$, $p = \text{ns}$) was not significantly different between the three cohorts for which first-year data were collected. However, the initial AL scores ($F(1, 85) = 12.33$, $p < 0.001$) and mindfulness scores ($F(1, 85) = 12.33$, $p < 0.001$) of the comparison group was significantly different than those of participants beginning the program. Possible explanations will be presented in the discussion.

Descriptive analyses

Table I presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables for each cohort. To determine whether participation in the training program was associated with an increase in AL (*H1*), a repeated measures ANOVA was first performed on the data from the cohort that had been surveyed six times over three years ($n = 20$). The results show that there was a significant effect of time on AL assessment ($F(5, 95) = 30.68$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.62$). Polynomial contrasts show that only the linear tendency is significant ($F(1, 19) = 85.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.82$) (see Figure 1). A paired-sample *t*-test comparing *T1-T6* was also performed, to control for the inflation of power in repeated measure analyses. Results show that there was still a significant effect of time on AL assessment ($t(19) = -8.41$, $p < 0.001$).

Second, a separate 2×3 ANOVA (pre vs post measure, and three cohorts) for the managers involved in each program year was carried out on the AL scores. The results show that, on average, the participants scored significantly higher on AL after completing the first year ($F(1, 55) = 37.01$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.40$); second year ($F(1, 50) = 37.21$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.43$), and third year ($F(1, 52) = 74.08$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.59$). A cohort effect was observed for the second program year ($F(2, 50) = 3.98$, $p < 0.05$). In tandem with this, a paired *t*-test was conducted on the data from the comparison group. The scores from the test ($M = 2.97$, $SE = 0.35$) and retest ($M = 3.05$, $SE = 0.39$), were not significantly different ($t(49) = -1.97$, ns), showing that there was no measurement effect (Table II).

Further, the content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the training program enabled the participants to develop competencies related to the four dimensions of AL. Of these four dimensions, however, the development of an internalized moral perspective was the least markedly evident. In the Appendix, the effects of the training program on the four dimensions of AL, previously reported in Baron and Parent (2015), are illustrated with excerpts from the interviews. *H1* is thus confirmed.

To determine whether participation in the training program was associated with an increase in mindfulness (*H2*), a repeated measures ANOVA was first performed on the data from the cohort which had been surveyed six times over three years. The results show that there was a significant effect of time on mindfulness assessment ($F(5, 95) = 9.49$, $p < 0.001$,

Table I.
Descriptives per
cohort and
correlation matrix
for authentic
leadership and
mindfulness

	<i>n</i>	Age ^a	Sex ^b	Years ^c	T1 January 2010	T2 September 2010	T3 January 2011	T4 September 2011	T5 January 2012	T6 September 2012
<i>Authentic leadership</i>										
Cohort 5 (2012-2014)	17	40.76	0.53	10.23						
Cohort 4 (2011-2013)	21	42.89	0.62	9.43						
Cohort 3 (2010-2012)	20	42.25	0.60	9.58	2.64 (0.53)	2.95 (0.40)	2.50 (0.39)	2.95 (0.32)	2.85 (0.49)	3.00 (0.48)
Cohort 2 (2009-2011)	19	41.5	0.68	10.42	3.00 (0.27)	3.14 (0.30)	3.18 (0.23)	3.27 (0.29)	2.99 (0.43)	3.20 (0.33)
Cohort 1 (2008-2010)	16	44.6	0.50	11.00	3.04 (0.31)	3.45 (0.25)		3.42 (0.40)	3.32 (0.30)	3.56 (0.21)
<i>Mindfulness</i>										
Cohort 5 (2012-2014)	17									
Cohort 4 (2011-2013)	21									
Cohort 3 (2010-2012)	20				3.97 (0.54)	3.97 (0.52)	3.42 (0.87)	4.02 (0.80)	3.87 (0.81)	4.12 (0.79)
Cohort 2 (2009-2011)	19				4.04 (0.72)	4.29 (0.65)	3.88 (0.58)	4.35 (0.86)	3.96 (0.77)	4.35 (0.33)
Cohort 1 (2008-2010)	16				4.24 (0.60)	4.36 (0.43)	4.44 (0.60)	4.45 (1.03)	4.23 (0.64)	4.81 (0.61)
<i>Correlation matrix</i>										
Variables	Time	1	2	3	4					
1. Authentic leadership	Begin.	–								
2.	End	0.74***	–							
3. Mindfulness	Begin.	0.35***	0.34***	–						
4.	End	0.23*	0.36***	0.52**	–					

Notes: ^aAge when beginning the program; ^b0 = women; 1 = men; ^cyears as a manager when beginning the program. Three different shading intensity identify participants in first, second and third year (from light to dark). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table II.

2×3 ANOVA for the
managers involved
in each program
year

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-ratio	Sig.	η^2
<i>Authentic leadership</i>						
First year						
Time	2.724	1	2.724	37.011	0.000	0.40
Time × cohort	0.372	2	0.186	2.528	0.089	0.08
Error (time)	4.048	55	0.074			
Second year						
Time	1.725	1	1.725	37.211	0.000	0.43
Time × cohort	0.369	2	0.185	3.984	0.025	0.14
Error (time)	2.318	50	0.046			
Third year						
Time	3.110	1	3.110	74.078	0.000	0.59
Time × cohort	0.146	2	0.073	1.744	0.185	0.06
Error (time)	2.183	52	0.042			
<i>Mindfulness</i>						
First year						
Time	2.214	1	2.214	7.168	0.010	0.12
Time × cohort	1.867	2	0.933	3.023	0.057	0.11
Error (time)	16.367	53	0.309			
Second year						
Time	2.616	1	2.616	9.324	0.004	0.16
Time × cohort	0.409	2	0.204	0.729	0.488	0.03
Error (time)	13.750	49	0.281			
Third year						
Time	3.267	1	3.267	16.463	0.000	0.24
Time × cohort	0.765	2	0.382	1.926	0.156	0.07
Error (time)	10.121	51	0.198			

$\eta^2 = 0.38$). Polynomial contrasts show a significant linear tendency ($F(1, 19) = 34.33$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.70$), and a quadratic tendency ($F(1, 19) = 12.09$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$). A paired-sample t -test comparing $T1$ - $T6$ was also performed. Results show that there was still a significant effect of time on mindfulness assessment ($t(19) = -5.31$, $p < 0.001$).

A separate 2×3 ANOVA (for pre vs post measures across the three cohorts) was carried out on the mindfulness scores for the managers in each program year. The results show that, on average, the participants scored significantly higher on mindfulness after completing the first year ($F(1, 53) = 7.17$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$); the second year ($F(1, 49) = 9.32$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$), and the third year of the training program ($F(1, 51) = 16.46$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$). No cohort effect was observed for any of the program years. In parallel with this, a paired t -test was conducted on the data from the comparison group. The scores from the test ($M = 4.55$, $SE = 0.60$) and the retest ($M = 4.69$, $SE = 0.71$), were not significantly different ($t(49) = -1.60$, ns), showing that there was no measurement effect. $H2$ is thus also confirmed. Finally, $H3$, according to which mindfulness is positively associated with AL is also confirmed (between $r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$ and $r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to determine whether a leadership development program based on action learning principles could foster development of AL. Because research on AL theory is still in its infancy, Cooper *et al.* (2005, p. 477) asserted that

“scholars in this area need to give careful attention to four critical issues such as ascertaining whether AL can be taught.” This question is paramount for advancing theory and research on AL. Our quantitative and qualitative results indicate that self-assessed perceptions of AL increased over time among participants in a leadership development program based on action learning principles.

These results are important, as it is the first time that a study has demonstrated that instead of “teaching” AL, a leadership development program using appropriate methods in the right training environment can “foster” the development of AL. Given the very nature of such leadership, many authors had suggested to move beyond the paradigm in which a trainer guides the participants through the content to be learned and the abilities to put into practice. As observed by Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007), true transformational programs have to provide the participants not only with good models and ideas, but also with the drive and energy to implement them, since what executives often need the most is “support in gaining psychological freedom of making choices of their own and being responsible for their own behavior” (p. 377).

The features of the leadership development program studied – namely its long duration; the sustained pace at which participants must engage in real projects in committees where the personal issues of each person are triggered; the sustained frequency at which the participants receive and give feedback in small groups and, progressively, to the community of participants; and finally, the peer coaching during and between the training sessions – all of these elements “force” the individual to make contact with his or her true self. Maintaining a “mask” would become highly uncomfortable in this context and would provoke a clear sense of isolation if the facilitators and, progressively, the community of participants failed to create genuine and authentic relationships to help the individual become more open.

Second, our results indicate that participation in the program increases scores of mindfulness, and that mindfulness was positively associated with AL. To our knowledge, this paper is the first to demonstrate that participation in a program of leadership development was associated with improved mindfulness. The best known intervention program designed to foster the state of mindfulness is certainly the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Several differences between the MBSR and the one studied should be highlighted. First, the program used in this study does not put an emphasis on meditation, although several experiments – such as a physical and psychological scan of ten minutes every day and a full 24 hours of silence during the third year – may have some resonance with meditative processes. Also, unlike the MBSR program, which is designed to support an individual experience, this leadership development program is above all an experience of self-exploration “within a community,” as the interactions among the participants constitute one of the central pillars of the program.

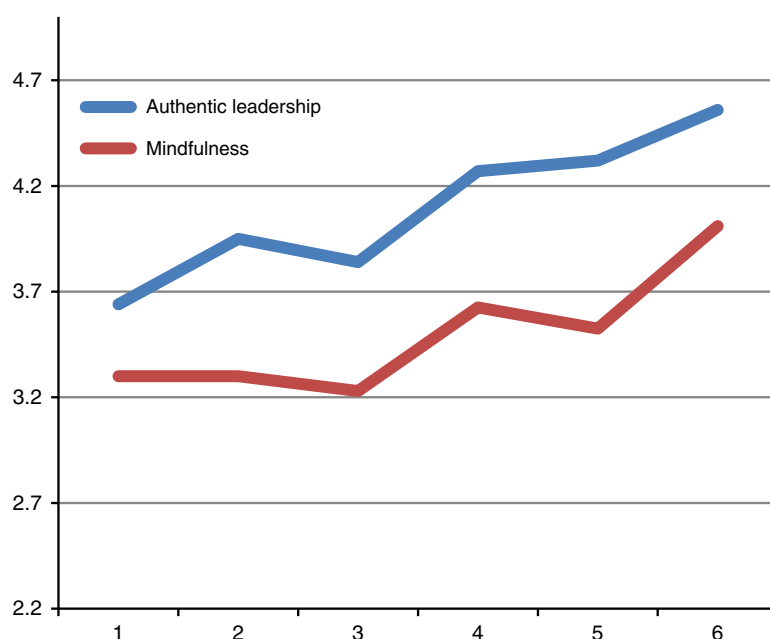
In addition, this leadership program has several similarities with programs based on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). As Grégoire *et al.* (2012) have summarized, the main goal of ACT is to bring a person to accept their emotions rather than flee them and to identify the values that enable them to engage in a more satisfying life. Through various practices designed to cultivate mindfulness, the person learns to focus their attention on what is being experienced in the moment, to identify the values that really matter to them and finally, to act accordingly and put into practice the identified actions and make a commitment toward them. Similarly, many of the exercises in the program studied intended to foster a clarification of values, commitment to them and coherent actions.

Lastly, two distinct phenomena observed during this study should be highlighted. First, the AL scores and, more markedly, the mindfulness scores of the comparison group were substantially higher than those of first-year participants. This observation could possibly be explained by the fact that participants enrolled in the program filled out the questionnaire at the end of the fourth day of the first training week. Their initial, pre-program perception of themselves as being authentic leaders or mindful could have been diminished, and possibly become more realistic, by coming into contact with their internal paradoxes and inconsistencies during those first days of training, which aim to develop self-awareness. Second, the AL and mindfulness scores of the third cohort (Figure 2) tended to decrease slightly over the first year of training before clearly increasing in the subsequent years. The qualitative data help explain this pattern, as many participants reported that in exploring new attitudes and behaviors, they experienced feelings of uncertainty or hesitation that made them doubt their abilities or lose their normal bearings. Many participants described their first year as uncomfortable and destabilizing. Thus a depatterning phase may precede the skills development phase:

I think it was the hardest year for me. It wasn't just for that first week; the whole first year was destabilizing for me. I wasn't sure I would come back [...] I didn't feel like making the effort to [...] I wasn't interested in suffering (Interview 12).

Limitations and future research

As with any complex field research initiative of this type, the current study has clear limitations. First, the limited access we had to the leadership development program did not allow us to follow more cohorts over the entire program, forcing us to adopt a cross-sequential design. Having a larger sample of participants who were surveyed six times would have enabled the use of randomized coefficients modeling to assess the trajectory of changes in AL between the measurement timepoints, as recommended for longitudinal studies on leadership (Ployhart *et al.*, 2002). Another limitation of the study



Notes: $n=20$. Maximum standardized score = 5

Figure 2.
Evolution of
authentic leadership
and mindfulness
standardized scores
over three years in
the leadership
development
program

is that only one training program was examined, which reduces the ability to generalize from the results. This limitation can be explained by the fact that AL is still a new concept, hence few training programs directly target its development. Finally, the effects of the various training practices specific to the professional development program examined in this study were not differentiated, i.e., it was not possible to determine which program components were the most effective. Another group participating in a partial version of the program would allow differentiation of the effective elements.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Appendix

Authentic leadership dimension

Representative excerpts

Self-awareness
All participants reported having experienced an increased awareness of their ways of acting. In particular, this involves recognizing and understanding attitudes and behaviors as well as the needs and values that engender those attitudes and behaviors

“The biggest difference is that, before participating in the program, I didn’t realize it. Now I’m aware of it [...]. Developing this ability to read – to read people, read their reactions, read the team and read myself” (Interview 6)
“I would say that what has changed is my ability to reach out to [my employees] and give them [feedback]. And becoming aware of all this. Sometimes we hear things and it goes clear over our heads – in one ear, out the other. We don’t take it in [...]. I have a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and of my ability to affect others” (Interview 18)
“More aware. One of the things I wanted to do, which was very important in the program, was to develop my awareness. Awareness of the things I have to be good at and the things I have more difficulty with” (Interview 20)
“Little by little, we succeed in developing more openness and, I think, better communication. We talk more. We go beyond work subjects. We discuss other things, about the person. My employees feel valued as individuals” (Interview 4)
“The fact that I have been approaching people these last three years [...] having the confidence to say, ‘If I’m doing something you don’t like, could you please tell me?’ Not everybody has that courage [...]. Because what you hear isn’t just compliments. The same is true for the other way around, saying, ‘What you are doing affects me.’ This way of addressing the things that affect us—it isn’t something I did before” (Interview 7)
“Basically, I had always been hyper transparent within the team. But when I was promoted, I became less so. Last year, I started having lunches with colleagues on the steering committees and I still do so on a regular basis, so we can talk outside of work. To get to know them, and they can get to know me as well” (Interview 24)
“I was less inclined to listen. I was more likely to just say what I had to say. What I notice now is that my automatic response, that little voice in my head, is always telling me: ‘Listen to what people have to say before you speak’” (Interview 2)
“By listening until the person is finished, then asking questions to make sure I understand, I can offer better comments that are more focused on the

Relational transparency
The participants reported showing greater transparency in their relationships as a result of their participation in the program. This was mainly manifested as increased authenticity in discussions, by revealing their sincere thoughts and emotions, as well as a greater tendency to give and receive feedback from peers

Balanced information processing
Most of the participants mentioned an increased propensity to listen to and analyze other people’s opinions and to question their own positions

Table AI.
Development of the four dimensions of authentic leadership among participants

(continued)

Authentic leadership dimension	Representative excerpts
Internalized moral perspective (authentic behavior) Although the improvement in this dimension emerged less markedly from the analysis of the interview transcripts, several participants did report giving greater importance to consistency between their values and personal standards and how they act and make decisions	task at hand. Instead of starting off with my own idea [...]. It might be a good idea, but it might not be the right place or the right time. I've learned to practice this – listening all the way to the end, I would say. I've changed the way I listen” (Interview 3) “For me, what is interesting is the feedback that you should ask your boss, your peers and your employees to give you. I do it and I'm not complacent about it either. If you really want to improve, you'll ask the people who will be honest with you” (Interview 22) “[I also put more emphasis on] my needs and values. In the sense that I can't have values outside of work, at home, and not have the same values at work. That's inconsistent. The values that are most important to me – I also apply them more at work” (Interview 8) “This also gives you greater legitimacy in your role. And you can define your own values, in keeping with who you want to be as a leader. And if you act in a way that is consistent with your values, keeping them in mind, you'll be comfortable with your decisions. So just being able to define them and to say that you act accordingly. Whether you are making difficult decisions or easy ones [...]. But for the more difficult decisions, as long as they are consistent with your values and those of the organization, you won't feel guilty about them. You'll feel validated in your role” (Interview 16)

Source: Baron and Parent (2015)

Table AI.

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