

Teaching leadership for improvement – a case study in distance learning effectiveness

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Abstract

Originality/Value

Our research provides insights to success factors for distance education.

Purpose

We look at the effectiveness of leadership education on distance. Our main purpose is to study if theories and methodologies taught are put into use and to what extent. We also look at the relevance of the topics. Another purpose is to assess effectiveness and success factors of distance education.

Methodology/Approach

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from questionnaire responses sent to former students and complemented with some interviews of the same students.

Findings

Our research indicates that leadership knowledge can be transferred effectively from theory to practise by distance education. Starting from the reality of the student is an important success factor. Quick feedback, which is individual, balanced and critical, is also important.

Keywords

Leadership education, distance course

Paper type

Research paper

Introduction

Globalisation brings harder competition and increased challenges of change. For any company to succeed it needs good leadership. In quality management leadership commitment is presented as one of the crucial core principles. In our view leadership is the process of directing the behaviour of others toward the accomplishment of some common objectives. Leadership is influencing people to get things done to a standard and quality above their norm - and doing it willingly. Leading others is not simply a matter of style, or following some how-to guides or recipes. Ineffectiveness of leaders seldom results from a lack of know-how or how-to, nor is it typically due to inadequate managerial skills. Leadership is even not about creating a great vision. It is about creating conditions under which all your followers can perform independently and effectively toward a common objective. Leadership is also a never ending process of self-studies with the purpose to know yourself and your behaviour as

individual and in a group better. Understanding group dynamics is essential in order to inspire employees into higher levels of teamwork. It could be argued that for any improvement, leadership forms the main resource basis on which success of change relies. It could be argued that all improvement work can be split into two main processes. The first one is creating the interest for change and the second one, improving processes (Isaksson, 2006). In the first process the leadership challenge is to create the willingness for change. In the second process it is to lead the actual change. In order to be a good leader many things are needed. Basic leadership knowledge could be seen to be based on the individual and the individual's behaviour in different group situations. Also, a leader needs to understand how behavioural expectations change in different types of organisational structures.

Gotland University has during several years carried out well frequented distance courses in leadership based on the elements described above. The typical student is a person with a degree working in some organisation, often in a managerial position. Course assessments have indicated appreciation and a high level of student satisfaction. However, the real test comes when theory is put into practise. The questions we have asked are if what is taught also is used and if it is relevant.

Our research is based on two of the basic leadership courses given at Gotland University. The research questions are:

- to what extent Gotland University's current leadership teaching is transferred into practical use in organisations
- how relevant the basic leadership theories are
- what are the success factors
- which are the areas of improvement

Approach

In Figure 1 we have described our research methodology. The core part consists of questionnaires complemented with interviews and some document studies. The methodology is based on triangulation (Denscombe, 2004).

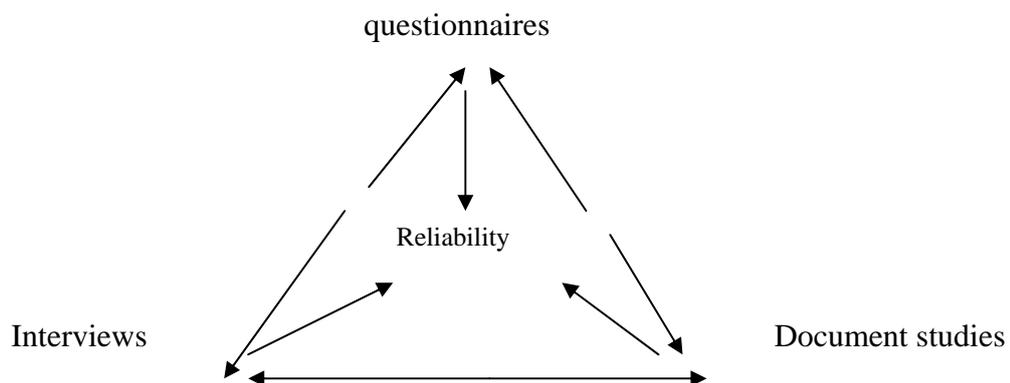


Figure 1: Method triangulation with focus on reliability.

The study is limited to theories used in the courses: “Individual and group based leadership” and “Leadership and Organisation”. These courses cover basic organizational theory and group dynamics. Some of the used theories are Schutz’ FIRO theory (Schutz, 1994), (Ljungblom, 2008a), Bion’s theory about ‘work group’/‘basic assumption’ (Granström, 2007),

Situation based leadership (Svedberg, 2007; Ljungblom, 2008b), Ås' theories about master suppression techniques (Ljungblom & Norberg, 2007), Bolman & Deal's 4 perspectives to organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2005).

Focus is on the individual and on analysing & exercising leadership in a real life context. More than 90% of the students are mature students, employed and often working full time. The questionnaires have partly been formulated based on the goals in the course plans that define what students should have achieved after the course.

Course plans state that the student should have acquired an increased understanding for:

- his or hers own leadership, based on theories, concepts and models
- the group dynamic process on both individual and group basis
- different types of organisational models
- the role, importance and shape of leadership in different situations and in relation to different organisational models

A research design can be defined as an action plan for getting from an initial set of questions to some answers about the questions (Yin, 2007). Our plan and design looked like this:

- Make a questionnaire
- Find students
- Test the questionnaire on a pilot group
- Modify if needed the questionnaire
- Send the questionnaire
- Compile the answers
- Make interview questions
- Carry out pilot interviews
- Modify if needed the interview questions
- Send interview questions
- Compile the answers from interviews
- Analyse based on data triangulation including literature

And this is the way we did it:

- Make a questionnaire
 - The research question of: *To what extent Gotland University's current leadership teaching is transferred into practical use in organisations* was translated into questions such as: If and how often students think and use the different concepts and theories taught on the courses
 - The research question of *how relevant the basic leadership theories are* was translated into questions on which particular theory has been used and why
 - The research question of *what are the success factors* was translated into questions like what was the best with the course and how it differed from other leadership courses
 - The research question of *what are the areas of improvement* was translated into question like what areas did you miss and why
 - Background information such as gender, type of course etc. was used to find information that could explain different results

- Test of the proposed questionnaire on a small campus class, which confirmed that questions were OK
- An alumni database for former students (2004 - 2007) was used. First we sent out a demand by e-mail (to 787 people) asking for those interested in participation. We received 100 answers (13%)
- We sent out the questionnaire to the 100 former students who wanted to participate. We received 66 answers translating to a response rate of 66%. This is 8% of the total population
- The answers from the questionnaire were automatically compiled using a data evaluation program called EvaSys. The program presents results in bar charts, with Likert scales and as free text
- The EvaSys free text data was clustered and analysed together with the bar charts and scales
- Interview questions were prepared as a complement to the questionnaire data and to make an in depth analysis for some randomly chosen respondents
- Twelve interviews were carried out
- Answers were compiled and analysed

Some comments to the results from data collection

The first question of interest in participation had a low response rate. We received 100 answers (13%) and 133 (17%) mail demons. Where are the missing 70%? One important reason for the lack of answers is change of e-mail addresses or non use of old ones. This problem has increased during the last year due to the obligatory use of a specific university mail address that is not used after the student has finished the education. This assumption was supported by the fact that out of the 100 respondents 68 were from students from 2004-2006. Our assessment is that there should not be any major bias in the answers we have received.

For those that had expressed their interest we achieved a response rate of 66%. The typical respondent is an employee (50%) and often a leader (27%). The majority are women (73%). The dominating age group is 30-49 years (76%). Many have a university examination (minor 43%, major 33%). One question is why there are so many women in this study? One answer is the fact that a higher percentage of women than men are studying at universities. This applies also for Gotland University. We looked at the statistics from Gotland University 2007 and these show that 61% of all the students were women. We interviewed 6 men and 6 women without any difference in the answers. We cannot explain the high proportion of women on the courses. We have not found any indication of why the course would attract more women than men. Based on discussions on findings we think that results are valid as well for men as women.

Research findings and analysis

Results are structured based on our research questions and an analysis of the findings is presented for each question.

Transfer and use of knowledge

To answer the question “to what extent Gotland University’s current leadership teaching is transferred into practical use in organisations” we asked the respondents for how often they think and use the theories taught. The questions were asked for both courses studied and indicated that students think and use the theories taught, see Table I.

Table 1: Thinking and using theories taught based on results from the questionnaire.

Course	Thinking about theories (%)	Using theories (%)
Individual and group based leadership	92.2	75.8
Leadership and Organisation	90.7	84.6

The respondents used a Likert scale to indicate the frequency of thinking of theories and of using them. The frequencies of use were similar on the two courses. In Figures 2 and 3 results from the course “Individual and group based leadership”. Only those who had replied yes answered this question.

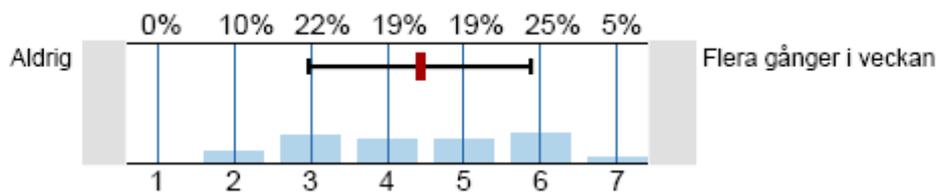


Figure 2: Compiled results for thinking of theories presented on a Likert scale ranging from never to several times per week. For course “Individual and group based leadership”.

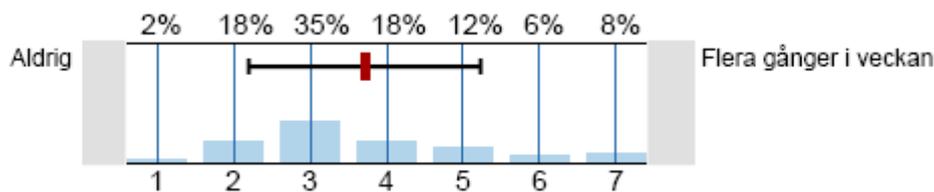


Figure 3: Compiled results for using theories presented on a Likert scale ranging from never to several times per week. For course “Individual and group based leadership”.

Results from interviews confirmed the impression that theories were being used. All 12 interviewees thought and used the theories. Several interviewees indicated that the frequency of use depended on the work situation. One interesting comment was that the longer the theories had been in use the more it became a natural behaviour that was used without much thought or reflection.

The findings indicate that the knowledge is being transferred and used by the students.

Relevance of chosen leadership theories

We also wanted to know which theories in particular were thought of and used. Results are clustered from the open question answers after how many times the theories were particularized. Results were similar for both courses and for thinking and using. The results presented in Figure 4 present an average from all the data.

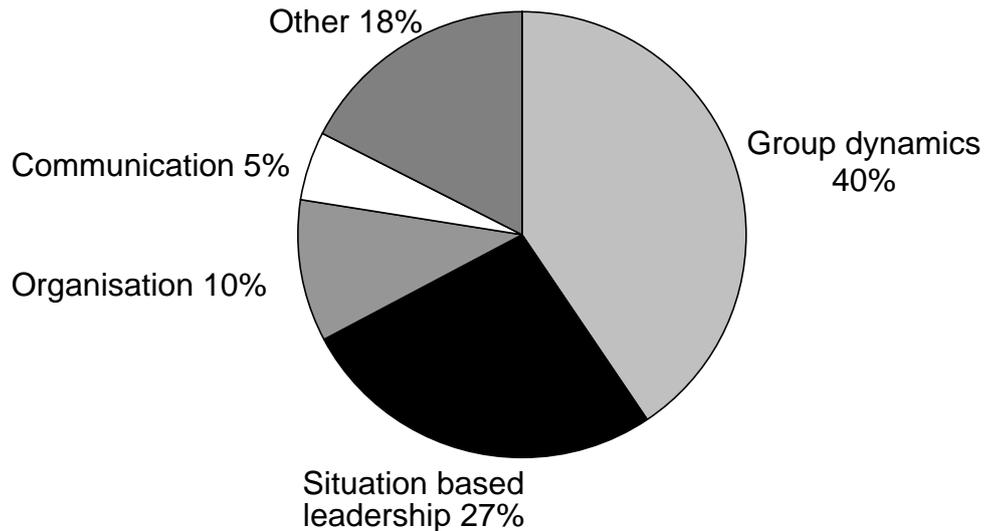


Figure 4: Distribution of theories thought of and used by students.

On the question if something was missing from the course content, 78% answered no. Of the 12 persons interviewed 9 said that they did not miss anything in the course content. Things missing were such as dealing with bosses, communication and coaching.

In the questionnaire we also asked why theories were not used. Out of the 15 answers we received, the majority answered that the reason was not being a leader.

In order to have an idea of how well they could judge leadership education, we asked the interviewees about other leadership courses they had been to. Most (10) had had some kind of other leadership education or training. Often this education was in similar fields like project management and leadership, communication and professional communication.

The relevance of the course content has also been explored by asking questions relating to personal learning. Results from the two courses have been summarised:

- Have you learnt more about yourself? – yes 89.2%
- Have you learnt to co-operate better with others? – yes 68.8%
- Have you become more secure in your working role? – yes 73.4%

We also asked those who replied no to the questions above. For this we have clustered the 15 answers received. These indicate that these students already had the knowledge before the course. This indicates that learning outcomes are as intended.

For each question above we have asked those who replied yes in what way they have learnt more. Results for these questions are presented in Figures 5-7.

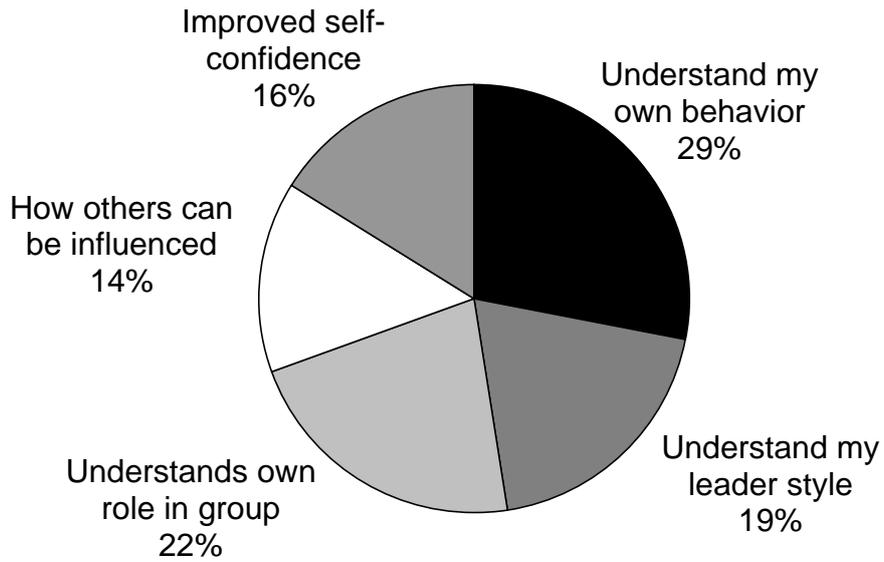


Figure 5: What the students have learnt about themselves.

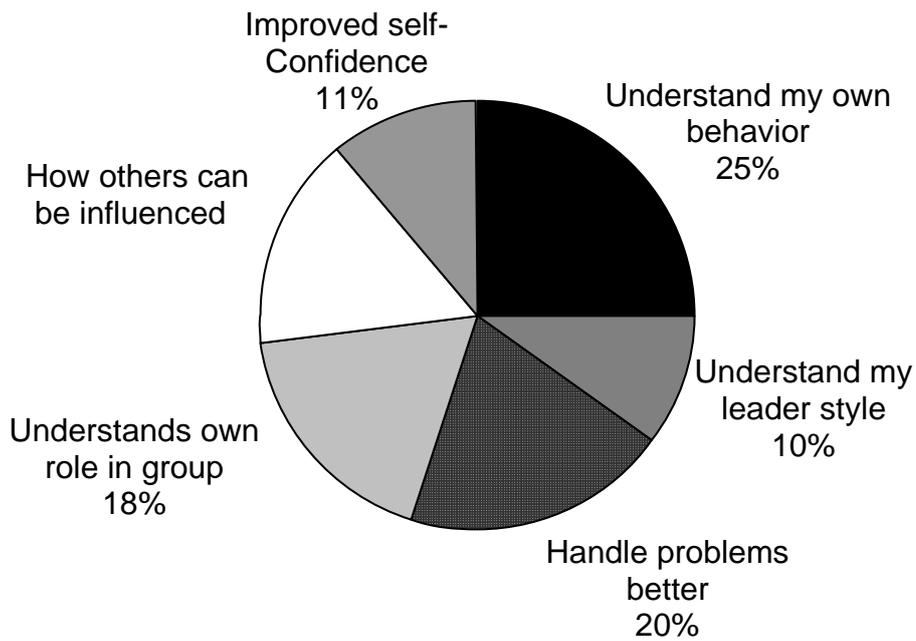


Figure 6: Easier to co-operate

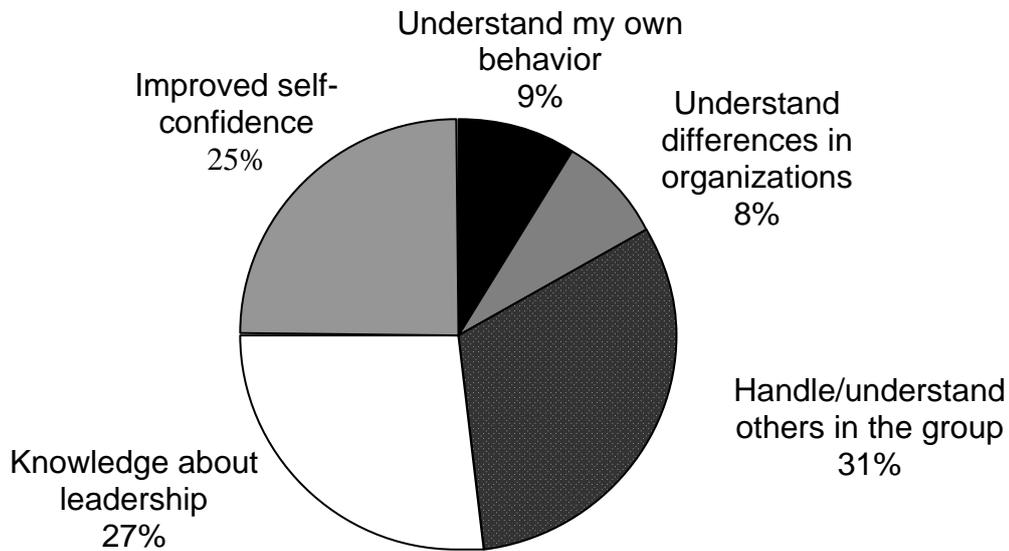


Figure 7: The working role

Leadership on an individual level, as described in Figures 5-7, should be best assessed by the person himself. Based on the results course content seems relevant. We have only received proposals on minor changes and improvements. Still, it hard to assess is if something is missing since respondents might need something that they are not aware of.

Success factors

We have used the free text responses in the questionnaire summary and the answers from interviews to identify success factors. We have clustered the information and carried out a qualitative analysis in which we also have used our experience base.

We believe tat one of the main factors, is that the education proceeds from reality (happenings) and uses theories to explain what happened. This was summarised in one of the interview responses where the respondent said: “Your course is different from others I have been to since instead of trying to force fit theory into practise you use the theory to analyse real life situations”. The problems presented to students encourage them to study their own groups, their leaders and their own behaviour in different situations and then to analyse this based on different perspectives. Consistent and overwhelming feedback from students describe that they have learned more about themselves, to handle problems and to lead other people. Pedagogical theory emphasises the importance of starting learning in something which is familiar for the student, which is the case in the courses studied.

Another factor that seems to be very important is the content and speed of feedback given from the teacher to the students. A lot of free text in the questionnaire summary is that feedback is: Given quickly, highly developed, helpful, encouraging, comprised and precise. It also seems to be important and highly appreciated to give both positive and negative

feedback. Quick feedback means responding to e-mails the same day and giving feedback on reports within two days.

Pedagogy is also commented in a positive way. The students mention good structure, a holistic perspective, flexibility (study in own tempo), change papers with other students and give /get feedback on reflections and specific problems. Students also appreciate the extent of literature, which is varied and gives them multiple perspectives to study their problems with.

Another frequently commented factor is that the theories and models studied are very easy to recognise in real life situations.

One more factor, mentioned frequently is that the teachers in the courses are very “on” – they try to get a campus feeling – to keep contact with students almost daily using mails, organises chats, send pictures and jokes. One student comments this with the words: “I have been getting more attention on this distance course than on many campus courses”.

Student feedback is probably affected by the general impression and could even affect feedback on content. There could be a risk of general over-rating. Even if we cannot exclude this risk we think that the effect of on the factual questions on use of theories is negligible.

Based on the results from this study we cannot put any priorities for the different factors identified. We have drawn some conclusions, which have affected the general practises and course design within the department. Information from other distance courses confirms that a quick response is very important. This has been externalised to our 24/7 rule for all courses. Mail reply within 24 hours and report feedback within 7 days. The pedagogical approach of combining theory and practise in an area familiar to the student is applied on many of the quality management department’s other courses both on campus and distance with success.

Areas of improvement

This is based on proposals from the questionnaires and from the interviews. Some of the students (22%) asked for physical meetings. In the interviews we asked if they would have participated in a meeting. Only one out of twelve said yes. This person lives in the vicinity of the university. Some of the interviewees made the comment that the reason for their application was that there were no obligatory meetings. One possible improvement is to add non obligatory web-meetings and chat-sessions to satisfy students with contact needs.

In order to improve understanding of the entire area of leadership we have among us teachers discussed making a categorization to highlight the areas we are covering. An issue related to this is the connection between leadership and quality management. Total Quality Management can be seen as a system consisting of values, methodologies and tools, (Hellsten & Klefsjö, 2000). One of the core values is management commitment which could also be expressed as committed leaders. Top management commitment is needed for any change but additionally there probably should be the commitment of all informal leaders. The challenge is to define the methodologies that support the value of leadership commitment. Theories on group dynamics and situation based leadership need to be more clearly defined as part of the organisational methodology resource along with methodologies such as process management, using self assessments and working with 6Sigma, see also (Bergman & Klefsjö, 2003). Current leadership education supports the human resource base in organisations. This could be more clearly integrated with general improvement theory in such a way that increased leadership knowledge also is transferred into improved organisational performance. Quality management traditionally has been relying heavily on quality methodologies and tools.

However, the quality gurus W.E. Deming and J. Juran have pointed out that only 10-15% of the operational problems can be solved at the operational level with the rest being system and management problems. Methodologies and tools are only of help when management leads in such a way that employees are enabled and encouraged to do the right things willingly. This is definitely a field of further research.

Conclusion and discussion

The proposed answers for our research questions are elaborated and discussed below.

Results clearly indicate that leadership competence is transferred to a high extent on the distance courses studied and that it is being used in the organisations. Non use seems mostly to be related to the position of the former students. Those working as leaders and in groups have better chances of using the theory.

How relevant are the basic leadership theories taught on the two courses? The indication based on student responses indicate clearly that what is taught is relevant. It could be argued that students that do not have an understanding of the entire leadership field would have difficulties in judging what is relevant. Results from interviews indicated a certain understanding of the leadership field. The main argument for relevance is that courses have achieved a high level of personal learning relating to the working place. For judging this perceived improvement the person to judge is the individual. A respondent perceiving an improved self-esteem has achieved something relevant. What about other areas of leadership outside of the personal focus? We have not tried to describe the entire leadership field, which remains for future work. However, we claim that what is taught seems to be relevant in leadership terms for the students.

We have only indicative answers for success factors and this area requires more research. Based on our understanding we think that the important factors are starting from the reality of the student and explaining it with practically relevant leadership theories, giving quick individual feedback that is encouraging but also critical.

The areas of improvement proposed based on results from this research are limited. However, our ambition is to more clearly integrate leadership courses with general improvement theory.

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