

ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACTS OF RURAL AND STATEWIDE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Organizations invest billions of dollars annually in leadership development programs (LDPs), yet few studies evaluate their tangible impact on organizational outcomes. While individual benefits of LDPs are often acknowledged, the extent to which these programs influence broader organizational change remains unclear. This qualitative study examines the organizational effects of two LDPs in the Midwest region with similar goals and curriculum: a small rural program (Program R) and a large statewide program (Program S).

A total of 24 participants—12 from each program—completed a Qualtrics questionnaire and participated in a 60-minute semi-structured interview. Data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti, with themes coded based on participants' perceptions of the programs' organizational influence. Two major themes emerged: (1) increased organizational commitment and (2) positive organizational changes. The first theme included subthemes of greater appreciation for the organization and an increased awareness of the organization's role in the community. The second theme encompassed added responsibilities, increased opportunities, and job-related changes such as promotions, pay increases, or title changes.

Findings revealed that all participants reported either positive or neutral organizational outcomes—none reported negative effects. Specifically, 50% described an increase in organizational commitment, while another 50% experienced positive organizational changes. Notably, participants from the rural program (Program R) reported more organizational benefits than those from the statewide program (Program S), despite Program R being less expensive and less time intensive. Program R participants were more likely to experience job promotions, increased responsibilities, and a stronger desire to give back to their organizations.

This study contributes to the limited literature on LDPs by highlighting their organizational impacts beyond individual growth. Results suggest that smaller, community-based leadership programs may provide more immediate organizational value. These findings raise important questions about return on investment for large-scale LDPs and suggest a need for future research on program design, regional variation, and long-term organizational outcomes. Evaluating the structure, scale, and contextual fit of LDPs may help organizations maximize their investments and better align leadership training with strategic organizational goals.

KEY WORDS

Leadership Program Evaluation, Organizational Impact, Leadership Development, Rural Leadership, Program Outcomes

Introduction

Billions of dollars are spent annually on leadership development for employees. Recent estimates suggest a gross total of approximately \$60 billion, most of which is funded by organizations to enhance their employees' skills (Yemiscigil, Born, & Ling, 2023). However, only 10-20% of organizations investing in leadership development programs (LDPs) evaluate or analyze the outcomes of these initiative (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010). Oftentimes, organizations assume that LDPs are beneficial without clear data on return on investment (ROI) (Kirchner & Akdere, 2014). The evaluations that are available often focus on short-term impacts and satisfactions scores (Frich, Brewster, Cherlin, & Bradley, 2015; Njah, et al., 2021). Most evaluations that discuss development focus on individual outcomes and very few asked anything about organizational impacts (Njah, et al., 2021).

Attempts to quantify the organization's ROI from LDPs yield inconsistent results. One large meta-analysis identified a potential 25% increase in organizational outcomes after employees participate (Lacerenza, et al., 2017). Another study showed that ROI ranged from negative to over 200%, depending on LDP factors (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010). Conversely, a study surveying senior managers from over 50 organizations for that 75% were dissatisfied with LDP outcomes (Beer, Finnström, & Schrader, 2016). A review of physician leadership programs reported that only 6 out of 45 participants observed favorable organization results (Frich et al., 2015). Clearly, further research is needed to explore whether and how LDPs lead to organizational benefits and to identify the most effective program models.

One explanation for this variation lies in how organizational outcomes are defined and when they are measured. Employees may gain leadership skills, but if organizational systems are resistant to change, those skills may not translate into broader impacts (Beer, Finnström, & Schrader, 2016). In contrast, if the culture of the organization allows for more freedom and opportunities, the outcomes of the LDP are more beneficial to both the individual and the organization. Organizational culture headed by a democratic, transformational bureaucratic, or autocratic leadership style noted a more positive impact on organizational performance than charismatic and transactional leadership styles (Al Khajeh, 2018). Additionally, LDPs often focus on individual development, which may not align with the organization's specific needs. Misalignment between training content and organizational priorities can limit broader impact. Furthermore, there may be barriers to applying new skills or implementation difficulties post-program (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). Some organizations have found that internal leadership development training helps to alleviate implementation issues and increase overall innovation levels (Sung & Choi, 2014).

Timing may also influence LDP effectiveness. Some LDP theories propose that individual outcomes are produced in the short term, whereas organizational outcomes come in the intermediate term, and community outcomes are long-term post-LDP (Njah, et al., 2021). Similarly, Kjellström, Stålnæ, & Törnblom, (2020) explain that leadership development can be thought of as progressing in a stepwise fashion with increasing complexity where a person's newly acquired leadership skills begin to benefit organizational outcomes later and comes with developing company culture.

Potential organizational outcomes of LDPs may include increased social capital, human capital, and collective leadership capacity. These skills help to deliver on goals, leverage resources, and continuously adapt with increases organizational resilience (Douglas, Merritt, Roberts, & Watkins, 2021). One LDP study, that had 60% rural programs, indicated that LDP participants had better attitudes towards the company, more networking, increased training proficiency, additional goal directed behavior, and a better understanding of the larger picture of the organization (Black & Earnest, 2009).

Despite the substantial investment in leadership development, empirical evidence of organizational outcomes remains limited. This study examines graduates from two Midwestern LDPs—one large, statewide

program (Program S) and one small, rural program (Program R)—and evaluates the organizational impacts of their respective LDP experiences. Two research questions guide this inquiry:

R1: How do graduates of a small rural and a large statewide leadership development program describe the influence of their program on their organization?

R2: From the perspective of the graduates, how and in what ways are the areas of organizational influence similar and different between the two programs being evaluated?

Methods

Two Midwestern LDPs with similar missions and curricula were selected for analysis. Program R is a small, rural LDP with an annual curriculum running from October to May, typically with one to two meetings per month. Program S is a large statewide LDP in a neighboring Midwestern state that runs from September to May, with one to three monthly meetings. Each program had graduated six cohorts at the time of the study.

Table 1 Leadership Program Characteristics

Factors	Program R	Program S
# of graduates per year	20	40
Time off work	9 days	18 days
Program Duration	8 months	7 months
Financial Cost	\$700 (general public) \$600 (chamber members) (includes shared hotel cost and some transportation)	\$3,000 (Excluding hotel costs and transportation)
% of Self-Funded Participants	Estimate 10% (mostly sole business owners)	Estimate 10%
Scholarships/stipends available	Recently introduced: ~5 available	10 scholarships of \$1,500 each
Post graduation options	Free alumni group (social gatherings)	Paid Alumni membership (\$100/year) and optional “Alumni Master’s Program” (\$25/class)

Twelve participants from each program (24 total) were randomly and purposefully selected to participate. Specifically, two participants were chosen from each graduating class to ensure stratified representation across all cohorts.

Participants first completed a Qualtrics questionnaire that included demographic questions and open-ended prompts regarding the LDP’s influence on the individual, their organization, and their community. The questions were designed to elicit information-rich responses relevant to organizational outcomes.

Following the questionnaire, each participant completed a 60-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom. These interviews allowed participants to expand on their responses and provide examples of the program’s influence. To enhance the credibility and validity of the study, both member checking and participant transcript review were utilized.

Qualitative analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. Common themes and unique insights were coded and quantified. Similar responses were grouped and reviewed by the researchers. Both the questionnaire and the interview data were coded according to their reported influence on the participant’s organization—categorized as positive, neutral, or negative.

Results

Two primary organizational influence themes and five sub-themes emerged from the qualitative analysis, as detailed below:

Table 2 *Organizational themes and subthemes*

1. Increase in individual's organizational commitment	1.1 Greater appreciation for organization 1.2 More aware of the organization's role in the greater community
2. Positive organizational changes	2.1 Added duties/responsibilities in organization 2.2 More opportunities because of leadership program 2.3 Increase in pay, promotion, or change of title

Table 3 *Organizational Topics by Participant and Program*

Participant ID (#)	Program	Overall Rating	Organizational Topics
(1)	R	+	More responsibilities and leadership at work, greater appreciate for my org, increase in pay, I see my org's purpose in my community
(2)	R	+	Learned how to interact at org better with DISC, added duties, want to do a better job for my organization because of LSC
(3)	S	+	Realized through LSD I was not at my max in my organization so I switched jobs to find that place
(4)	R	n	No change/neutral
(5)	R	+	Title changed, increased org commitment
(6)	R	+	Organizational partnerships due to network, more committed
(7)	S	n	No change/neutral
(8)	R	+	Promotion
(9)	R	+	New role that fit me better (minor org increase)
(10)	S	n	No change/neutral
(11)	S	n	No change/neutral
(12)	S	n	No change/neutral
(13)	R	+	Aware of how I communicate with employees, more confident in my role...so give back to org after their investment in me, more aware of organization's role in the community
(14)	R	+	Job title changed, org commitment, more responsibilities, invest back to my organization
(15)	S	+	Increased leadership roles in organization
(16)	R	+	Org invested in me so I see value back to them
(17)	S	+	New clients, higher income, talk with coworkers better
(18)	S	+	Awareness of organizational impact
(19)	R	+	More connected to people in organization
(20)	S	+	More opportunities, more appreciation, increased org commitment
(21)	S	+	Supported by organization, promotion, feel valued by organization
(22)	R	+	Job title changed, now use DISC in organization
(23)	S	+	Can take organization to the next level (good quote)
(24)	S	+	New role at work, appreciate organization more

Table 3: Participant ID (#) is a randomly assigned number that remained with the participant throughout the study to track demographic information with qualitative responses. . A synopsis of the participant's organizational impact is also included in the table.

Note: "R" = Rural Program; "S" = Statewide program. "+" = positive impact, "n" = neutral impact. No Participants reported negative organizational outcomes.

Theme 1: Increase in Individual's Organizational Commitment

Fifty percent of the participants described a positive impact on their personal commitment to their organization following participation in their LDP. This theme includes two sub-themes:

Sub-Theme 1.1: Greater Appreciation for Organization

Many of the participants noted that they believed the LDP influenced their appreciation for their organization. Some participants noted their appreciation stemmed from the financial investment and support from their organization to participate in the program.

I'm so appreciative that they allowed me to go through Program S. (24)

I am very pleased my organization has supported Program S as a sponsor every year since the beginning. They not only believe in leadership development, they support it with time and dollars. Many of our team members cite commitment to learning and development as a reason they joined our company. (9)

Other responses showed an appreciation of their organization's commitment to leadership development and the obtainment of new skills. It allowed participants to understand and relate more to their organizations.

beyond appreciation to an awareness of the culture or 'why' to working at their company. The value of that appreciation towards an organization/employer could be beneficial in recruitment and retainment of employees. (9)

I would say my commitment level increased as I grew to understand and enjoy the community in which my employer is located. (6)

I am very committed to my organization, as I believe in its mission and want to continue to see it improve. Because my employer paid for me to go to Leadership, I want to make sure I use the skills I learned to the fullest of my abilities and help our organization grow. Because of the investment they made in me, I want to invest it back in our organization. (13)

In addition, the response from Participant 13 was unique from the others in how their feelings went beyond appreciation to the desire to invest back into the organization.

Sub-Theme 1.2: More Aware of Organization's Role in the Greater Community

Some of the participants stated they believe their LDP was influential in improving awareness of their organization's role in the greater community. Some elaborated and described realizations of the financial commitment, time, employee development, and community impact their organizations do. Few noted feelings of thankfulness for these realizations when they were present, but many participants were not able to articulate their organization's direct role in their community.

I am grateful that they supported me through the commitment it took to be in the program. I have a greater appreciation for our organization's part in impacting the community around us. (1)

Not many participants connected the role of their own organization to their community. Having an appreciative member like Participant 1 is good for an organization, but perhaps the LDP did not focus on the personal connections to the organization.

Theme 2: Positive Organizational Changes

Theme 2 is a more tangible recognition of change of the organizational impact their leadership program had. Overall, 50% of the participants noted positive organizational changes including added duties/responsibilities, more opportunities, increase in pay, new promotion, or job title change.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Added Duties/Responsibilities in Organization

Some participants noted that being involved in the LDP provided them the opportunity for added duties or responsibilities in their organization and elaborated on this sub-theme.

I was able to take on a few more duties and do things I excel at. (2)

Definitely taking on more than before and I feel some of that correlated with the skills I learned in the leadership program. (5)

These examples show similar statements of added duties or responsibilities with a few mentioning skills or tools gained that provide confidence in abilities to do more.

I have taken on more HR duties and responsibilities. Leadership has helped me take that step and given me some tools to lean on as I make this change. (13)

I took on more responsibility and leadership at work - the business needed project leaders, and I was able to drive some large projects. (1)

Sub-Theme 2.2: More Opportunities Because of Leadership Program

Certain participants noted a link between the LDP and new opportunities. They describe opportunities to be involved in the advancement of the organization, increased management levels, and benefits stemming from the expanded network for their job.

I have always been extremely committed to my organization, but being able to elevate my leadership skills and network through Program S has helped me to take my team and organization to the next level! The skills and knowledge I gained helped the entire organization through my elevated leadership. (23)

We experienced organizational changes and I was asked to manage two departments initially (one of which I already previously managed), then manage the new one solely, and then I had the opportunity to move into a new role and help establish a new department. (24)

Similar responses regarding growth in opportunities were noted. Many commented on specific skills, knowledge, or tools that helped the participant gain more opportunities. The details in these statements show energy, passion, and excitement for new growth which should have a positive influence on the individual and their organization or community role.

I was able to use the tools and resources I learned from the leadership experience into my job. My head of school role demands much more community networking for development, advocacy, school promotions, visibility, and more, and I was able to build relationships with people before needing to fulfill these tasks in my new school leadership role. I was able to hit the ground running because of the connections I had. (22)

I've been given a grand opportunity to evolve my role and play a significant part in the ongoing development of our leaders and talent in general. While my title and compensation haven't significantly changed, that's been more of a personal choice as I enjoy very much what I'm currently doing and have turned down a chance to advance into a different role. Other company alumni have taken bigger opportunities since graduating, and I believe it's a combination of selecting high potential participants and then those individuals leveraging the experience to a high degree. (9)

Sub-Theme 2.3: Increase in Pay, Promotion, or Change in Title

Twenty-nine percent of participants stated they believe their LDP influenced their pay, promotion, or job title in some way.

My employer strongly supported my involvement in Program S and made a commitment to my professional development. I was promoted to Sr. management position after completing the program. (21)

My job title changed due to a promotion after my leadership program. (8)

A job title or promotion change are visible transformations for the employee and other employees resulting from the LDP. Overall, 79% of all participants noted that their LDP had made positive influences towards their organization. Some respondents had more influential aspects than others with some stating 'no change' which was categorized as neutral, but no one responded as negative. The two key themes of organization data were also tracked for frequency of responses (Table 4).

Table 4 *Organizational Theme Frequency*

Theme	Data Frequency	Results
Increase in individual's organizational commitment	12 of 24 participants mentioned a stronger commitment and higher value towards their organization	50% (themes tied for highest)
Tangible Organizational Changes (duties, promotion, positive influence that the LDP had pay)	12 of 24 participants identified this as changes between the individual and the organization	50% (themes tied for highest)

Interestingly, some participants noted new clients for their organization while others noted they realized they were 'maxed' at their current organization and found a better opportunity at a different employer. Even those that changed organizations did not note the LDP's influence as negative to the organization, but neutral. Many of the participants commented on a feeling of wanting to 'repay' or 'give back to' the organization for the investment they made into having them attend a LDP resulting in a higher organizational commitment in return.

Organizational Similarities and Differences between Programs

Though the curriculums and mission of Program R and Program S were similar, results showed distinct differences in organizational outcomes between the two LDPs outlined in Table 5.

Table 5 *Organizational Theme Positive Response Differences*

Organizational Category	Program	Positive Responses	% Positive
Organizational Commitment	*R	8/12	67%
	S	4/12	33%
Added Responsibilities, Increase in Pay, Title Change, etc.	*R	7/12	58%
	S	5/12	42%

Note: The cells with an asterisk note the higher percentage or "winner" between the two programs

In both organizational themes, participants in the small rural LDP achieved higher positive outcomes with a total of 15 versus 9 from Program S. More Program R participants noted an increase in their support of local businesses due to their participation.

Discussion

Fifty percent of the total participants noted a positive organizational influence, while the other fifty percent noted no organizational influence. Importantly, no participant described a negative organizational impact. Both major organizational themes—increased organizational commitment and positive organizational changes—were achieved by 50% of the participants. These findings raise important considerations for organizations investing in LDPs, especially given the significant financial commitments involved.

In this study, only 10% of participants from both programs self-funded their LDP participation, the rest of the participants entered their LDP with financial assistance from their organizations. Program S costs approximately \$3,000 and includes hotels and transportation, and Program R costs \$600-700 and excludes hotel and transportation costs. Because financial investment is a key factor in assessing return on investment (ROI), organizations must carefully evaluate whether their support of LDPs is yielding measurable organizational benefits.

The range of organizational outcomes seen in this study, from neutral to positive, mirrors the variability of organizational ROI reported in previous studies (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010; Frich, Brewster, Cherlin, & Bradley, 2015; Lacerenza, et al., 2017). This variability underscores the need for stronger alignment between LDP content and organizational outcomes to ensure more ROI.

Interestingly, Program R (the smaller, rural LDP) showed more positive organizational outcomes than Program S (the larger, statewide LDP). This was a surprising result as Program S had more meetings and was more expensive than Program R. The results could indicate that the smaller Program R had more focus on organizational outcomes, or those from rural regions were more inclined to focus on how they could provide for their organization.

All the participants from both programs noted that they had positive individual effects from the LDP, whereas only half of the participants noted positive organizational-level outcomes. This may support the tiered model proposed by Kjellström, Stålnæ, & Törnblom (2020) and Njah et al. (2021), in which LDPs first impact the individual, then the organization, and eventually the community. More research needs to be done to parse out the timeline of impact on individuals, organizations, and communities.

Additionally, participants from the earlier LDP cohorts tended to struggle more in identifying specific examples of organizational impact, thought they still recalled personal benefits. LDPs and organizations may need to work on closing the gaps between what participants are learning and how it can be applied to their organization. Creating a program of learning personalization and contextual learning that is tailored to the individual's job context and organization has been shown to help decrease this implementation gap (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

Notably, all promotions mentioned in this study were reported by female participants, while both genders reported pay increases and title changes. Additionally, all job title changes occurred among Program R participants. This points to the potential of LDPs—particularly community-focused models—to support career advancement among women. Research by Brue & Brue (2016) highlight that female specific LDP outcomes often include greater positional changes, increased feelings of empowerment, increased relationships and interconnectedness, and finding a voice. These findings suggest that regional and rural LDPs may be especially beneficial for female leaders, and that gender-specific evaluations should be incorporated into future LDP research and design.

Limitations

The study was confined to two Midwestern leadership programs, which may limit generalizability. The participant population was racially and educationally homogenous, reflecting the demographic characteristics of the region.

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported qualitative data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants may have been reluctant to share negative experiences, particularly if they remained affiliated with their LDP through alumni events or leadership roles. While efforts were made to mitigate these risks through member checking and anonymity, interviewer influence and participant self-censorship may still have occurred.

Future Research

This study provides a foundation for additional qualitative and quantitative research on the organizational outcomes of LDPs. Future research should consider how to garner greater benefits back to organizations. Because of the large investments companies have in formal leadership education and the results from this study showing lackluster ROI, additional studies are needed to research how to increase benefits to organizations. In this study, Program R participants had greater organizational influence, future comparative case study approaches diving into this factor could help to tease out the program portions that are most beneficial. Additionally, researchers could investigate the organizational influence on funding/supporting LDPs and the positive organizational themes that result over time.

Lastly, including regional program analysis could be beneficial as well. Regional LDPs are gaining popularity around the country. These programs are typically larger than Program R, and smaller than Program S and come in a variety of formats. Regional programs may be able to capitalize on the benefits from both small and large LDPs. Adding a regional LDP type would provide a more accurate representation of organizational outcomes across the LDP types and reveal elements of each program type that can lead to the most beneficial outcomes.

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