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The effectiveness of leadership development in the military context from a gender viewpoint

Abstract

In this case study, leadership development is investigated from the viewpoint of women in a military context. In particular, the effectiveness of a leadership development program in a specific context, namely the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF), is explored. The program being studied is unique because it is concerned with developing volunteers, not professional soldiers. A longitudinal, interview-based study of the topic was conducted with women who had participated in the program. The data consists of 45 open-ended interviews with 15 women. Each woman was interviewed three times: at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the program. An instrumental case study strategy was used to analyze the data. The results show that the current leadership model for effective leadership in the FDF would benefit especially from the addition of an intrapersonal leadership competence dimension, to better take women's needs into consideration. By making the female point of view visible and acknowledging women's views, new resources can be created for military organizations.

Keywords: case study; effectiveness; gender; leadership development; military leadership; woman

Introduction

Leadership development refers to a planned educational process (Mumford et al., 2000) designed to expand a person's competency and capacity in leadership tasks (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004). A basis of leadership development is the idea that many of the competencies leaders need are, by nature, transferable and generic and can therefore be developed through a planned course of training. Prior research on leadership development suggests that leadership development can be effective at an individual, organizational and societal level – specially for women. (Mumford et al., 2000; Ibarra et al., 2013; Debebe et al., 2016; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017).

Gender roles in military organizations in Finland are highly segregated - as elsewhere. The Finnish military follows the international pattern found in most of the armed forces that are based on conscript forces, that the share of women is lower compared to that of men (Carreiras, 2006). Women are often evaluated less favourably than men in the military context, facing more career barriers than their male counterparts and being treated as less competent leaders (Cohn, 2013; Archer, 2014). In general, despite Finland's advanced ideologies, politics, and legislation with regard to gender equality, in practice there is gender segregation, with the result that women have more difficulties than men in achieving positions of leadership (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). This is problematic not only in terms of the equal treatment of women but also in terms of the under-utilization of potential human capital.

Leadership development can work against gender discrimination by giving women the credentials of a competent professional (Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Simpson, 2006; Ibeh et al., 2008; Vinnicombe et al., 2013; Idrovo Carlier, 2015; Debebe et al., 2016). Previous studies (e.g. Häyrynen, 2017) indicate that military leadership development can affect women's

leadership competency, with consequences not only in the military context but also in the broader context of society and organizational life.

Although there has been some discussion about the integration of women into the armed forces (Tresch & Varoglu, 2007; Haring, 2013), empirical studies concerning leadership from a gender viewpoint in the military context are rare.

Objectives

This case study will increase knowledge about leadership development from women's viewpoint in the military context. This study explores specifically the effectiveness of leadership development in the context of the FDF. The article has two objectives:

1. To introduce the case being investigated, which is a military leadership development program in the FDF. This single case was selected for the following reasons (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In the first place, we were given a rare opportunity for data access to the leadership development program of the FDF. Secondly, the Finnish military training system is unique because it is based on developing volunteers, not professional soldiers. Thirdly, more and more women are participating in military service (FDF, 2017) and women do the same service as men. Finally, although in many countries, military leadership development is divided into two systems: one for conscripts and another for officers (Carreiras, 2006), in Finland these systems have been integrated successfully.
2. Using a longitudinal, qualitative study, to explore the effectiveness of a leadership-training program in the FDF as perceived by women who participated in the program. This study understands a military leadership development program as a process whose primary aim is to develop the competency participants need to successfully perform military leadership tasks. The effectiveness of the program is defined in terms of the consequences of the influence of the program on the

competency of the women who participate in it. Effectiveness is thus connected to whether the goals of the program were perceived as accomplished by the women (Kirkpatrick, 1998).

However, it is possible that the influence of the leadership development program goes beyond just the goals of the program. Therefore, our research setting is exploratory by nature (Stake 2005, 2013). In this way it becomes possible to detect not only gaps in the goals and outcomes of leadership development but also outcomes, which were not included in the goals of the development program. Such findings can open the door to new ideas in leadership development.

By exploring women's perceptions of the effectiveness of the leadership development program on women's leadership competency, we contribute to prior research on leadership development in the military context by adopting an under-represented gender perspective and, thus, extend the current body of knowledge on the topic. Despite some criticism put forward of the effectiveness of leadership development (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005), in line with Lämsä and Savela (2018) we argue in this article that leadership development can be effective when an appropriate and context-sensitive approach is defined and adopted.

This case study provides real-world and significant information that can be used for promoting and planning effective leadership development for women in the military context, and in general. The study presents a case example of a leadership-training program that can be considered an important practice promoting women's military leader career opportunities and, ultimately, gender equality in working life and society in general.

The case study: a military leadership-training program in Finland

Finnish military national defense policy underlines the civic duty of military service. This duty starts at the beginning of the age of 18 year and continues until the end of the year in which he/she turns sixty years. (FDF, 2016b.) Military service in Finland lasts 165, 255 or

347 days, depending on the individual's rank and intended duties. Military service is obligatory (with some exceptions) for males in Finland, but not for females. Women, if they are interested, have had an opportunity to participate in military service since 1995.

Approximately 500 women participate in military service every year. (FDF, 2016a, 2017.)

Number of females in military service is relatively low. After the service, women enter the reserve and are called upon to update their competency on the same principles as men..

Military service and military leadership development for women is realized in all tasks; military duties and training are not divided according to gender in Finland. (FDF, 2016b.)

During the basic period some participants are selected for leadership development, for which there are two alternatives: as a reserve non-commissioned officer (NCO) and reserve officer training. All of the participants first go through the *NCO Course I* (NCO 1) and a selected group continues to the *Reserve Officer Course* (NCO 2). Approximately 69% of female conscripts undergo the military leadership development program. This figure differs significantly from the figure for male conscripts: only 29% of men participate in the program. (Finnish Defence Forces, 2016a.)

Theoretical Background

Leadership competency is taught and learned in the FDF on the basis of an approach called deep leadership (Nissinen 2001; FDF, 2016b), which draws on transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985). From a gender viewpoint, there are two different arguments for transformational leadership. Some researchers (e.g. Avolio & Bass, 1995) say that transformational leadership is a gender-neutral theory in which such aspects as vision, meaning and inspiration are central components. Carli and Eagly (2011) suggest that transformational leadership, in stressing the individual consideration of followers and social relationships between leader and follower, is more appropriate to the female than the male gender role. Arnold et al. (2014) studied effective leadership from a gender perspective in

extreme conditions in the Canadian military forces. They concluded that the role of feminine leadership behavior should be better recognized in the military context than it is now. This context needs increasingly to cross-stereotypical gender boundaries when developing an appropriate and successful leadership culture.

Deep Leadership Model

Nissinen (2001), who researched transformational leadership in the Finnish military context, further developed transformational leadership theory to fit the military context in an approach called the Deep Leadership Model (DLM). The DLM emphasizes, firstly, the leader's professional competence and exemplary behavior and, secondly, the evaluation of leadership behavior. According to the DLM, it is important that leadership behavior is assessed through an external evaluation process (Nissinen, 2001).

There are two important aspects in the DLM. Firstly, evaluation focuses on the behavioral state and capacity of the person in the process of exercising leadership. Secondly, evaluation is targeted not only at assessing leadership behavior but also at emphasizing the importance of learning from the assessment and feedback. According to the DLM, leadership behavior should be assessed in the short and long term (Nissinen, 2001.)

In the DLM, it is assumed that a person is ready for and open to leadership, and this builds a foundation for her/his behavior. The leader's readiness and behavior can affect the reactions of the people being led. The leader can learn from feedback received from followers and other constituencies to develop leadership readiness. With the help of external feedback, the leader can develop her/his readiness and behavior in leadership tasks. (Nissinen, 2001.)

The DLM is based on firm foundations (Nissinen, 2001), which are in line with the ideas of Bass (1985). These foundations are trust, inspiration and motivation, intellectual challenge, and individualized consideration. Building trust and confidence is the most important of these because such characteristics as honesty, fairness and impartiality come

first in successful leadership. Inspirational motivation is the second most important cornerstone in the DLM. Through inspirational leadership behavior, the leader can get his/her followers to find a shared goal and can encourage commitment among them. By intellectual stimulation Nissinen is referring to how far the leader is able to challenge followers' assumptions and bring out their ideas. Finally, the fourth foundation is individual consideration, recognition by the leader of everyone's individual needs to grow and develop, as well as treating followers as individuals. (Nissinen, 2001, p.223.)

DLM in the Finnish military context

Since 1995 the idea of effective leadership in the Finnish military context has been based on the DLM (Nissinen, 2001; FDF, 2012). In its practical application, the DLM stresses several dimensions – both transformational and transactional by nature – such as professional skills, building trust and confidence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, controlling and corrective leadership, passive leadership, effectiveness, satisfaction, and extra effort (Nissinen 2001, p.218–225). By professional skills the model refers to the practical skills and knowledge, which are needed in the relevant task. (FDF, 2012.) The leader who is trusted sets a behavioral model for others. Showing inspirational motivation means that the leader can help followers to find meaning and challenges in their work, while intellectual stimulation requires that the leader is open to new ideas. Individual consideration means that the leader provides followers with personal support and is aware of each follower's ambition to develop and grow. (Nissinen 2001, p.218–225.)

In the DLM, controlling and corrective leadership is related to the transactional and negative nature of leadership, in which a leader does not trust her/his followers and, as a result, control increases. Passive leadership refers to exercising leadership only when she/he must do so. These dimensions are not desirable qualities in leadership behavior, but can occur

in practice and need to be changed. Finally, another positive dimension is extra effort, which refers to followers' commitment to the leader, community and targets; with this, followers are motivated to voluntarily increase their work performance. (Nissinen 2001, p.218–225.)

Methods

The current study adopts an instrumental case study strategy (Stake, 2005, 2013). The instrumental case study was seen as a suitable choice for a research phenomenon because it provides an opportunity to examine real world data from which suggestions, ideas and notions about women's leadership development can be extrapolated. The instrumental case study strategy is appropriate for researching topics that advance our understanding of the contextual nature of a research phenomenon (Stake, 2005).

The data consists of 45 open-ended interviews with 15 women who participated in and passed a military leadership development program in two platoons. The median age of the interviewees was 22.5 years (from 17 to 29 years). The interviewees were from two different platoons from different branches of the service that had more than five female conscripts from different geographical locations undergoing military leadership development. Every woman was assigned a code to guarantee her anonymity, which was an important and indeed essential ethical principle of the study. Participation was voluntary.

Our research setting is longitudinal. Each woman in the study was interviewed three times. The first round of interviews was done after the women had been selected to undergo the leadership development program, at the end of their basic military training period. The second round was at the end of their reservist non-commissioned officer (NCOs) and/or their reservist officer course. The last round was at the end of their military service. All of the interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and were transcribed word for word.

As a result, we analyzed five main competence groups and then further subdivided these into 16 sub-groups. Competencies were categorized according to their content. Finally, to make the data transparent we made some simple quantification of the data to illustrate the competencies gained from the program.

Analysis

The interviewees considered that they had gained many types of leadership competencies from the development program. Table 1 presents an overview of the competencies. The first column shows the core competencies of development extracted from the data. In the middle column the content of the core competence category is described in more detail by introducing various sub-groups for each core competence. Finally, the right-hand column shows the frequency of the core competencies detected in the data.

Viewing the entire research data (table 1), the core leadership competence that was mentioned most often by the interviewees was the development of intrapersonal competence (45 mentions). Intrapersonal competence includes competencies such as self-esteem, self-confidence and the ability to clarify one's own way of leading. This competence concerns the development of the leader as a human being. In particular, an increase in self-esteem was often mentioned; it relates to a positive personal change in the woman's being and acting. The data also revealed that circumstances where the women needed to handle difficult and demanding situations, such as to motivate a group move during a mission in the middle of the night when everyone was tired and hungry, was experienced as significant for growth of the person's self-esteem. The respondents mentioned that they had gained courage to accept new challenges also in their future civilian life. Self-confidence was also perceived as a crucial intrapersonal competency gained from the training. In particular, feedback from trainers in the leadership training was said to be important in helping the women's self-reflection, which was said to contribute to the development of self-confidence. Feedback helped the women to

find their own leadership style. In the data, the development of self-confidence was also related to the women's acting successfully in various physical and mental challenges during the training. Improvement in decision making was experienced during the service time.

Emotional intelligence competence includes competencies such as the ability to take others into account, self-expression, patience and self-awareness. Taking others into account was pictured as taking care of the trainee's own group. Participants learned to take care of everyone in their group, even those for whom they felt no particular sympathy. Self-expression was pictured as clarifying the participants' opinions of others and also supporting the voice of women in the participant's group being heard when, for example, decisions were made. The women participating learned to be patient, for example when they had to help someone pack his/her backpack all over again, because they knew that any member of their group could cause trouble for everyone if that person was not helped and taught properly.

The research data revealed that difficult and demanding situations were experienced as significant for the growth of the women's self-awareness. They learned their own strengths and weaknesses while helping others. During their service time, the interviewees said that they learned how to tolerate and value diversity, see things in the right proportion and endure any challenging situations that arose, both mental and physical. The interviewees mentioned that experiences they had had during the leadership-training program could affect their values later, in civilian life. They believed that they had gained a new perspective on small everyday problems and could distinguish useless, negative things in their surroundings and distance themselves if necessary.

Social competence includes competencies such as relationship skills, coping with and learning from diversity, motivating others, and organizational skills. Compulsory national service gathers people from a certain age group from all areas of society and social classes, so relationship skills play an important part in conscript leader activities. Training was

experienced as giving them authority, which was in turn experienced as contributing to their leadership without distancing them from their group members, and as not having an unnecessarily strict attitude towards the members but rather being able to motivate others in a constructive way. Relationship skills were visible in the research data also from an ethical leadership point of view. Once a leader, the woman has to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and equally in relation to other group members; she has to prevent any personal prejudices affecting the decision making. Combining training and practical exercise was experienced as important in the development of social competence specifically in relation to the diversity of the trainee's group members. According to the interviewees, coping with and learning from diversity is a critical competence in the military context, and its importance is growing all the time. Being able to lead different kinds of people means being able to cooperate constructively with people from various backgrounds. The interviewees reported that military service had opened their eyes to how to understand and deal with diversity. Approaches used in the training, such as peer review, were seen an important part of developing social competence. Organizing different kinds of training activities helped the trainees develop their organizing skills. Organizing skills, which included being able to work on a range of activities with people from diverse backgrounds, were felt to be significant for the growth of the woman's social competencies.

Pedagogical competence as a core competence refers to areas such as presentation skills, teaching skills, and directing and motivating other people. In the data, presentation and teaching skills were related to being able to have a good overview of the lessons the trainee needed to give to other group members and also to divide lessons into shorter parts. Additionally, the ability to select relevant material and knowledge for their teaching was mentioned as being crucial. Pedagogical competence differs from technical competence in that pedagogical competence focuses on a general practical ability to train and teach other

people in a group, while technical competence is related to branch-specific teaching skills such as marksmanship or how to safely handle weapons.

Discussion and recommendations

We conducted a longitudinal, qualitative case study on the effectiveness of a leadership development program in the context of the FDF as perceived by women who participated in the program. This study furthers understanding of leadership development specifically in the military context by voicing the rarely heard women's point of view (Carreiras, 2006; Ibeh et al., 2008; Cohn, 2013; Häyrynen, 2017). Empirically, we produced a conceptualization concerning the competencies gained from the training program in question.

The results of the study are in line with the transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) in that they recognize the importance of psychological mechanisms in leadership development. The study suggests that leadership development has the potential to provide women participants with motivating vision and to strengthen their identity as leaders, but this requires that particular attention in the training process - and indeed in the army in general - is paid to the psychological and social challenges that women face, such as tensions in identity construction and gender stereotypes in the male-dominated military context (NATO, 2015).

When the empirical results of this research are compared to the targeted leadership model, the DLM, in the FDF, we can see that the competencies that were described by the participants in this study as those that were important elements in their developmental path to leadership are only partly in line with the model. In particular, the intrapersonal and emotional intelligence competencies detected in this study, such as self-confidence, self-esteem and emotional self-awareness, are not so prominent in the DLM. However, the studies of Lämsä and Savela (2018) in the Finnish context – although not in the military context – showed that it is crucial to strengthen these competencies among women who aspire to

leadership positions. In our study, such challenges may be even more evident, because the participants were young women in the early developmental phase of their career.

Our results indicate that also the multiple social relationships and the demanding physical and mental events that women encounter in military leadership development can be crucial elements in the development of the women's leadership competency. We recommend systematic consideration of these elements and their application in both the planning of the curriculum for military leadership training for women and the conducting of the leadership training in practice.

The DLM emphasizes the behaviors of leadership that can be externally evaluated (FDF, 2012). Additionally, the DLM also emphasizes the importance of considering other people when exercising leadership (Nissinen, 2001). However, the results of this study suggest that what is important to young women are not only external evaluation and influence of their leadership on others but also ways of supporting self-reflection and one's capacity for self-evaluation. It seems that the program investigated here was a traditional training-oriented, rather technical program that did not officially offer very much time or very many tools for self-reflection and self-evaluation. In general, in the field of leadership development there is increasing interest in supporting people's understanding of themselves, which typically requires personal development approaches, such as mentoring, coaching, peer support and discussion in addition to traditional training (Lämsä & Savela, 2018). It may also be the case that the younger generation – at least in the Finnish context – is socialized to and demands from development and training more personal reflection and discussion than earlier generations expected.

We think that due to the many changes in the environments of organizations, including military organizations, there is a need to promote people's understanding of themselves and also their ability to broaden their mind-sets to handle the increasing

complexity of their environment. In particular, in crisis situations, which require rapid action and decision-making and are a crucial feature of the military context, such competencies can provide a basis for appropriate and context-sensitive leadership behavior. In general, this raises the need for a variety of pedagogical methods in a goal-oriented military leadership development program.

One issue that is worth discussing here is the gender composition of leadership development programs. In the military context as well as in most cultural contexts, the notion of effective leadership is connected with maleness (Carreiras, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Carli & Eagly, 2011). This means that masculine characteristics are valued in leadership and this ideal is also followed in leadership development programs (Simpson, 2006). In this kind of environment, women tend to experience the double-bind challenge that they never feel right (Carli & Eagly, 2011).

In mixed-gender settings, but where the number of men clearly exceeds that of women, as is the case in the army, there are gendered pressures on women (Debebe et al., 2016). This is likely to cause more strain and stress on women than on men and also create more identity-building challenges for them. Additionally, women feel the need to justify themselves as valued participants who conform to the required norms, for example, so they work harder and show higher competency than their male counterparts. At least two solutions to this problem can be suggested. Firstly, gender-sensitive teaching and learning practices (Debebe, 2016) are important. Secondly, the gender balance in development programs needs to be improved.

The comparability of military activities, such as leadership development cannot be taken for granted (Carreiras, 2006) due to differences between armed forces. Therefore, future studies should be conducted in other societal contexts than Finland. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons would be an important research avenue in the future.

Conclusion

It seems likely that future military organizations will face more diversity among both conscripts and personnel. This implies a need for greater cultural sensitivity and the acceptance of diversity in these organizations and in their operations. One aspect of diversity is the role of women in the military (Häyrynen, 2017). Knowledge gained from this study provides some guidelines as to what kind of ideas and orientations it might be worth taking into consideration when the target is to develop women's integration into the military context.

Our results allow us to conclude that particularly the development of intrapersonal competence is an important aspect of women's military leadership development programs. This requires some new ideas in planning and conducting leadership development programs and making them more individualized.

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Table 1. Summary of the results

Core competence category	Sub-competencies	Frequency of main competencies mentioned in the data
Intrapersonal competence	Self-esteem Self-confidence Own leadership style	45
Emotional intelligence competence	Taking others into account Self-expression Patience Self-awareness	36
Social competence	Relationship skills Coping with and learning from diversity Motivating others Organizational skills Sense of proportion	34
Pedagogical competence	General training and teaching skill Presentation skills Directing others	19
Technical competence	Professional skills	9