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Games Managers Play: Play as a Form of Leadership Development

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In recent years, organizations have expended considerable effort and resources to develop and improve managers' leadership skills through various forms of play. I explore the role of play in leadership development processes. Drawing on theories of leader and leadership development and theories of play, I develop a conceptual framework, suggesting that play can contribute to different components of leader and leadership development processes (i.e., leadership identity, cognitive abilities, and behavioral skills). Furthermore, the role of creating safe play spaces in leadership development processes is highlighted. The discussion examines the implications and applications of play for leadership development processes, points to the dangers of misuse of play, and outlines directions for further empirical research.

> "At some point as we get older . . . we are made to feel guilty for playing. We are told that it is unproductive, a waste of time, even sinful. The play that remains is, like league sports, mostly very organized, rigid, and competitive. We strive to always be productive. This is not the case. . . the truth is that in most cases, play is a catalyst. The beneficial effects of getting just a little true play can spread through our lives, usually making us more productive and happier in everything we do" (Brown, 2009).

> "A child in play acts 'as though he were a head taller than himself'" (Vygotsky, 1978: 102).

In recent years, organizations have expended a great deal of effort and resources in an attempt to teach managers how to lead (e.g., Industry reports, 2000). Recent approaches to leadership challenge the notion that individuals are born as leaders and focus on ways to develop individuals' capacity to engage effectively in leadership roles (e.g., Day & Zaccaro, 2004; McCall, 2004). This has resulted in various methods, training programs, and workshops designed for this purpose. Many organizations view leadership development as a major source of sustainable competitive advantage and place leadership development at the core of their corporate culture (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). Leadership development programs and processes have become instrumental in many organizations, and they have fostered an industry that generates vast sums of capital and offers a broad range of possibilities (e.g., Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

Over the past decade, research attention has been devoted to the theory and practice of leadership development (e.g., Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Collins & Holton, 2004; Day, Zaccaro, & Halpin, 2004; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The general consensus is that different managerial populations need different kinds of learning opportunities, but little theoretical and empirical guidance exists to help practitioners and HR personnel select or combine methods that are best suited to each group (Guillen & Ibarra, 2009).

Some leadership development programs consist of experiences that span just a few hours, while others may last several days, or even take the form of extended seminars. In addition, the nature of

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such programs runs the gamut from relatively traditional programs to experiential programs for personal and spiritual growth. While the former is generally comprised of lectures on theoretical concepts and approaches, training in leadership skills, and feedback on leadership style, the latter type can be characterized by such wide-ranging approaches as arts and crafts, Tai Chi, Eastern philosophy, orchestra conducting, and outdoor nature challenges (e.g., Conger, 1992; Mirvis, 2008; Starkey & Tempest, 2009). A recent comprehensive study that summarizes 163 studies on management training programs indicates that some but not all, of these methods and approaches are effective in terms of different criteria, such as the participants' reactions, learning, behavioral change, and measurable organizational results (e.g., Arthur et al., 2003).

One type of leadership development program that is attracting growing attention is programs in which managers participate in activities that involve play. Spearheading these play-oriented programs are the popular "outdoors programs," in which managers are asked to overcome natural obstacles, build log structures, go whitewater rafting, walk on tightropes, hunt for treasure chests, and experiment with fictional identities (Conger, 1992; Jones & Oswick, 2007; Petriglieri & Wood, 2005). Managers are also invited to take part in "indoor" play involving role-play and simulations, strategy games, and computer on-line simulations (e.g., Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Rafaeli, 2010).

Play is a unique and universal human experience. Huizinga's (1955) seminal work "*Homo Ludens,*" (the man who plays) demonstrated the centrality of play to humanity and the construction of culture as manifested in everyday life. However, the postindustrial revolution has created the "myth of separate spheres" that permeates our culture (Kanter, 1997). This "myth" entails splitting off the public sphere and the workplace from the private sphere, and from leisure and play, in an attempt to enhance organizational efficiency, rationalization, and profitability through control mechanisms (e.g., Mainemelis & Altman, 2010).

Recently, play has become increasingly acknowledged as an important factor in offices and organizations. *Fortune*-500 companies are being consulted on how to incorporate play into businesses (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Meyer, 2010). Various companies such as Google, Patagonia, Gore, Motorola, and Du Pont encourage their employees to use up to 20% of their work time to play freely with new ideas (Mainemelis & Altman, 2010). In the "Top 10 reasons to work at Google," number four on the company Website is "Work and play are not mutually exclusive: It is possible to code and pass the puck at the same time" (Meyer, 2010: 70). Current leadership development programs and processes also rely on play as a central component of leadership development (Petriglieri & Wood, 2005; Rafaeli, 2010). Social scientists have also underscored the importance of play in calibrating individuals (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and in contributing to employees' development as well as to their mental and physical well-being (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). However, the role of play in leadership development processes has not been adequately studied by researchers, and the theoretical underpinnings have barely been considered.

However, the role of play in leadership development processes has not been adequately studied by researchers, and the theoretical underpinnings have barely been considered.

I endeavor here to make sense of the role of play in the context of leadership development by examining the various potential meanings of play and the ways it can contribute to the process of leader and leadership development in an organizational context. I present a conceptual framework for understanding the role of play in leadership development processes by drawing on theories of leader and leadership development (Conger, 1992; Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005) and theories of play from different streams of thought in the social sciences (e.g., psychological, anthropological, organizational, and medical). I offer a model suggesting that play can contribute to different (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) components of leader and leadership development processes, with an emphasis on aspects of the leader's identity. The first section of the paper presents theories of leadership development, defines the concept of play, and examines the importance of safe play spaces for leadership development processes. The second draws on different theories of play to explore the possible contributions of play to leadership development (leadership identity development, conceptual and cognitive ability, and leadership-relevant skill development). The final section discusses implications and applications and depicts the possible dark sides of the use of play in the leadership development processes.

KEY CONSTRUCTS

Leader and Leadership Development

Leadership has traditionally been conceptualized as an individual-level skill. Within this tradition, development is thought to occur primarily through training individual intrapersonal skills and abilities (e.g., Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Neck & Manz, 1996). A complementary perspective approaches leadership as a social process that engages community members (Barker, 1997; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In this way, each person is considered a leader, and leadership is conceptualized as an effect rather than a cause (Drath, 1998). These theories consider that both individual and social-relational lenses are important elements of leadership development.

In line with this perspective, Day and coauthors (Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007; Day & Zaccaro, 2004) developed a model that distinguishes between leader and leadership development. The aim of *leader development* is to enhance human capital (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999; Lepak & Snell, 1999). The primary emphasis of this development strategy is to build the intrapersonal competence of the individual, foster a mature leader identity, and enable more effective performance. Typically the focus is on individual-based knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with formal leadership roles. Specific examples of the types of intrapersonal competence associated with leader development initiatives include self-awareness (e.g., emotional awareness, self-confidence); self-regulation (e.g., self-control, trustworthiness, adaptability); and self-motivation (e.g., commitment, initiative, optimism; Day, 2000).

A second, separate concept of development is *leadership development*. The primary emphasis in leadership development is on building and using interpersonal competence. This perspective focuses on social capital (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999). Unlike human capital, which is focused on the development of individual knowledge, skills, and abilities, social capital is focused on building networked relationships among individuals that enhance cooperation and resource exchange to create organizational value (e.g., Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Social capital is based on relationships, which are created through interpersonal exchange. This view highlights the social nature of leadership and the idea that effective development best occurs in an interpersonal context. Hence, social capital requires an interpersonal lens that is grounded in a relational model of leadership (Drath, 1998; Kark, 2011). Key components of interpersonal competence include social awareness (e.g., empathy and developing others) and social skills (e.g., collaboration, building bonds, and conflict management; Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007).

Furthermore, leadership development also includes the development of group-level competencies of relational and shared leadership. When leadership is shared, it is distributed among a set of individuals instead of centralized in the hands of an individual (e.g., Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Shared leadership puts forward a concept of leadership practice as a group-level phenomenon. Leadership development at the shared leadership group level is comprised of competencies such as group learning, team creativity, and the relevant behavioral skills for mutual leadership.

Each framework (leader development vs. leadership development) is designed to develop different levels of leader identity (individual, relational, and collective; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Because leadership involves multiple individuals engaged in a process of interpersonal and mutual influence that is embedded within a collective context, the construction of a leadership identity invokes all three elements of self-construal: individual internalization, relational recognition, and collective endorsement. *Individual internalization* is a state where individuals come to incorporate the identity of leader or follower as part of their self-concept (Day & Harrison, 2007; Gecas, 1982). *Relational recognition* of the leader by the other calls for a mutually recognized role relationship between the leader and follower (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). *Collective endorsement* is about being seen within the broader social environment as part of a particular social group, for example, being part of the management team (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Leader development deals with the level of the individualized self; whereas leadership development is about further developing a relational and collective leadership identity. Thus, leadership development processes that engage all three levels of self-construal will reinforce a solid, complex, and mature leadership identity. As a result, it is thought that the most value resides in combining what is considered the traditional, individualistic approach to leader development with a more shared and relational approach to leadership development.[1]

[1] In actual leadership training programs leader and leadership development may be highly linked, since an effort to develop the leader's intrapersonal capacities may at the same time enhance individuals' interpersonal skills. However, I differentiate here between the processes that foster leader versus leadership development to develop a clear conceptual framework.

Components of Leader and Leadership Development

The development of leadership ability is a complex process. According to Conger (1992), who extensively studied "learning to lead," successful leadership development programs and processes must be designed to address three features: (1) personal growth, (2) conceptual ability, and (3) skill development. The first component of personal growth relates to experiences that tap individuals' personal needs interests, build self-esteem, and help clarify and develop individuals' interests and motivation to lead. Conger's (1992) definition of personal growth can be extended to the formation of a leadership identity at different levels of self-construal (individualized, relational, and collective). Personal growth can be perceived as strongly related to emotional processes and to processes in which a leadership identity becomes, is consolidated, crystallizes, shaped, reshaped, and transformed in interactions with others (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

The conceptual and cognitive ability component entails developing individuals' abilities to think about challenges, analyze a situation, provide a conceptual framing of a situation, stimulate intellectually, and develop novel and creative directions. It also includes the ability of the leader to become involved in deep learning and to have a clear conception of the leadership role itself. The third component of development of skills is focused on learning important behaviors and refining the use of teachable skills that are important for the leadership role. The skills needed are likely to change as individuals advance in roles vertically and horizontally in the organizational setting. This model proposes that a full range of leader development process occurs and is effective when the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects are addressed.

Below I present a conceptual framework that links different levels of "leader" and "leadership" development with play and shows how play can contribute to leadership development at the individual and the relational-collective levels. Three leadership development components will be examined: (1) personal growth through identity development, (2) conceptual and cognitive abilities, and (3) leadership-relevant skills.[2]

The Concept of Play

Play is a popular and ancient human activity. Evidence of its existence dates back as far as 200 BC (Habas, 2002) and was evident in some of the largest and most complex organizational feats of antiquity: the Greek Olympic Games and the bloody Roman circus (Mainemelis & Altman, 2010). The notion of play can be defined in many ways and is complex in terms of its nature, purpose, and manifestation. *Play* has been defined as a vacation from reality (Erikson, 1950), purposeless activity (Bekoff & Byers, 1998), fundamentally different from earnest activity (Lorenz, 1994), amphibolous (going simultaneously in both directions; Spariosu, 1989), an activity one is not obliged to do (Twain, 1988), or a voluntary intrinsically driven activity without a specific purpose that is done for its own sake and is associated with pleasure and enjoyment (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2010).

In this paper I follow the definition of Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) who define *play* as a behavioral orientation consisting of five elements: a threshold experience (threshold between the true and the false, convention and illusion, inner and outer reality); boundaries in time and space (play is circumscribed within limits in time and space); uncertainty-freedom-constraint (play usually involves surprise and uncertainty); loose and flexible association between means and ends; and positive affect (for further elaboration see Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006).

Play may consist of amusing, pretend or imaginary interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions or interplay. The rites of play are visible throughout nature and are observed among human beings and animals, particularly in the cognitive development and socialization of those engaged in developmental processes and the young. When play is structured and goal oriented with preset rules, it is often defined as a "game" (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

"Play" can be distinguished from "work" by contrasting the purposes, processes, and spaces in which it takes place. The notions of work and play do not represent different activities; rather, they are characterized by different ways of approaching activities or different frames for acting (Glynn, 1994). In play, the primary drivers of behavior are enjoyment and discovery rather than goals and

[2] Each leadership development component includes a wide variety of outcomes. For example, personal growth can be seen in the form of developing a leadership identity, but also as enhancing self-regulation and optimism. Here, I chose to focus on some of the possible outcomes in each section to demonstrate and highlight the possible contribution of play to leader and leadership development. For example, with regard to conceptual and cognitive abilities, I focus on the development of the ability to learn and think creatively, although many other outcomes can also be present.

efficiency (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; March, 1976). Another core distinction between work and play activities concerns their focus on process versus outcomes, or means versus ends (Miller, 1973). Glynn (1994) found that individuals engaging in activities framed as "work" tended to have an ends orientation, whereas those engaging in the same activity framed as "play" had a means orientation. In work settings, once behavior is no longer channeled toward specific goals and ends, it is replaced by the pleasure of taking a winding route. In such a case, other guidelines for decision making come to the fore, such as intuition, emotion, and taking a leap of faith (March, 1976). These deviations from normal operating procedures and rules of conduct facilitate expression and creativity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

Here, I focus on play that is used in leadership development processes (e.g., leadership training programs, workshops, seminars, and on-the-job training) and is designed to develop individuals' and groups' ability to lead in terms of their leadership identity development, conceptual ability, and skill development. This differs from the free play that various organizations provide during recess, work breaks, or outside working hours.[3] When play is designed by organizations and facilitators to develop leadership, it also risks losing its essence as "purposeless activity" and its nature as an activity oriented toward the "means and process" rather than on the "outcome and ends." However, the differences between play and work are not likely to be dichotomous, rather they may be on a continuum, and play may be enacted, not merely for pleasure, but also to promote the goal of leadership growth and development. Thus, although play in leadership development programs may have some purpose and goal, if it is enacted in a way that involves enjoyment, centers on the process or means, and the measurable outcomes are suspended, individuals are likely to experience a behavioral orientation to "play."

There are different forms and types of play. Play may vary with regards to the players. It may be enacted by a sole individual (e.g., the game of solitaire), it may take the form of a dyadic interaction, or it may be an interaction shared by a team or a large group. Play may also differ in terms of its level of emotional arousal. For example, outdoor activities such as rope climbing or an intense role-play of situations of conflict may elicit higher levels of emotional arousal than puzzle completion games. Play can also be more focused on a specific leadership role in the form of role-play or a simulation that is strongly related to an actual situation in the organization, or alternatively, it can take the form of make-believe and be highly imaginative and diverge from the day-to-day reality of the organizational context. Furthermore, play may be structured as competitive, or as a communal experience which results in mutual benefits. Here, I relate to play as a general term; however, it is evident that different forms of play may lead to different types of leader and leadership development outcomes. Therefore I highlight below the types of play that may be most beneficial for the proposed outcome.

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Play Spaces as Sites of Leadership Development

Another important distinction between work and play is the space in which they take place. Work and play frames are enacted in different physical and psychological settings. For Huizinga (1955), play has three central characteristics: It is free, it involves stepping out of "real" life, and it is bounded in space and time. Play activities are often buffered from work activities by physical and temporal boundaries (e.g., sabbaticals, time-outs, and vacations). From an anthropological perspective, the play space is defined as a *liminal zone* (Turner, 1974), a sacred transitional phase observed in different societies where cultural and communal practices are freed from normative social structures. Within a liminal space, tribe members are granted temporary freedom to explore playfully the sacred in the form of rituals and myths. As Turner (1974) notes, "in liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements" (60).

In psychological terms, play is situated within the safety of a transitional space where children can explore and express themselves without societal pressures. Psychologically, play occurs in a space in between external and internal reality, or a transitional space (Kolb & Kolb, 2010; Spariosu,

[3] Firms such as Google and Patagonia authorize their employees to spend some of their working time in free play. Another recent trend concerning play in organizations is called *gamification* (see: http:/gamification.org/wiki/Gamification), which refers to applying game design to different nongame applications activities at work, such as marketing, health, and education. Although this type of free play and gamification is also important it is not the type of play I refer to here, since my focus is on play that is directly aimed at developing leadership and not on play in general that may have other important aims (such as encouraging employees' work involvement, vitality, and work commitment).

1989; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Winnicott, 1971, 1975). This betwixt-and-between nature of play is an important component. It distinguishes play from other activities and makes it a universally recognizable phenomenon (Huizinga, 1955). Play requires a relatively safe space to try out new and untested identities, thoughts, and behaviors (Glynn, 1994; Shrage, 2000; Winnicott, 1975). Many of the ideas about the relationship between play and psychological safety derive from research on the stages of transition periods and children's maturity. Children imagine their futures and play out these possibilities through games, reverie, and make-believe explorations (Winnicott, 1975). The play world they create defines a region between an objective external reality and an entirely subjective internal world. Through play, the child prepares to accommodate illusions to real representations in the external world. This process can be best achieved in a safety zone, in which children can give free rein to their imagination, gradually defining and testing newly emerging possible selves (e.g., Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Moustakas, 1997), under the watchful and loving eye of the caregiver.

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In recent research on experiential learning and play, Kolb and Kolb (2010) focused on the importance of *ludic*, or play spaces where playful behaviors thrive. They contend that "for a learner to engage fully in the learning cycle, a space must be provided to engage fully in the four modes of the cycle—feeling, reflection, thinking, and action. It needs to be a hospitable, safe and supportive space that is characterized by respect for all, but is also challenging. It must allow learners to be in charge of their own learning and allow time for the repetitive practice that develops expertise" (Kolb & Kolb, 2010: 45). These spaces are characterized by the absence of extrinsic evaluation, which thus frees individuals to set their own learning agenda and terms.

Such environments also tend to have the characteristics of holding environments. *Holding environments* are spaces in which cognitive and emotional experiences, at times unsettling, give way to meaning. Winnicott (1975) highlighted the fundamental importance of holding environments for children's healthy development, not only cognitive learning but also in developing an embodied, emotional understanding of the world. Children are not alone in needing holding environments to progress between stages of human development. It has been argued that individuals need safe holding environments in the context of work organizations (Kahn, 2001), mostly when potentially disabling anxiety at work is experienced. In the workplace, holding environments have been defined as a social context that reduces disturbing affect and facilitates sense making (Kahn, 2001). Such organizational spaces are likely to provide individuals both containment, which is the ability to absorb, filter, or manage challenging or threatening emotions or ideas so that they can be used for inner work (e.g., Bion, 1970), and interpretation, namely, the ideas that provide connections, meanings, or a way of understanding what can be learned from an experience (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Thus, in organizational life, certain physical settings delimit a psychological space and time that creates safety and holding, provides relief from the pressure of social validation, and legitimizes exploration (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). This suggests that for individuals to benefit from processes of leader and leadership development, the conditions of safe spaces must be provided. Spatial boundaries, such as those around leadership development programs in which managers can explore in play (scenarios, simulations, role-plays, outdoor experiences, games and other forms of play) can encourage departures from existing norms and procedures by allowing people to suspend requirements for consistency and rationality, and, as they play with possibilities, develop new skills or self-images that can be transferred back to their day-to-day work environment (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Senge, 1990; Shrage, 2000).

Leadership development training programs, as well as structures for "on-the-job" leadership development following these programs, can provide play spaces that can function as "safe havens" "protected milieux" or "holding environments" that have boundaries that partially keep out the world, so that individuals can remain open to what will unfold within them (Louis, 1996). This can enable individuals who are to become leaders or people who are already in leadership positions to rehearse a variety of possible selves, new ideas, and to experiment with new skills without necessarily seeking to adopt any of them on a permanent basis, and eventually make transitions (Ibarra, 2003; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

Play is an activity of utmost seriousness which is played out within a "consecrated spot" mentally and physically, with strict rules of its own (Huizinga, 1955; Kolb & Kolb, 2010). Leadership development processes and programs can become "consecrated spots" for experimenting "seriously" with play, thus allowing leaders to experience personal and relational growth. The ability to play in a safe environment or time-bounded space can help people develop as leaders. This is because a safe environment enables them to experiment with a range of provisional leadership images, switching from one to the other and adopting various possible selves before settling on a new direction and making transformations in the way they chose to think and act as leaders.

However, not all leadership development programs that incorporate play can provide a safe haven or become ideal "concentrated spots" for serious play. Leadership training programs and processes can vary in the levels that they suspend evaluation and judgment, focus on ends and efficiency, or provide safe holding spaces to experiment with play.[4] This implies that the potential of play to contribute to leader and leadership development will be enhanced when individuals and groups taking part in leadership training programs experience psychological safety and feel free from external critiques, direct judgment, and organizational implications.

Proposition 1: Psychological safety will moderate the relationship between play and leader/leadership development. Contexts with a high level of psychological safety in comparison with contexts with a low level of psychological safety will yield more positive effects of play on leader and leadership development.

[4] Various researchers see the notion of safety as a defining component of play and suggest that safe spaces allow play to occur (e.g., Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006; Winnicott, 1971, 1975). Since I focus on workplace and organizational contexts, I suggest that play can also occur in contexts which are only partially safe and that the degree of safety experienced by individuals will affect the level of learning and development that an individual can derive from experimenting with play. The question of causality still remains unresolved, because safety can promote play, and play may promote a sense of safety; however, I contend that the level of safety will moderate the level of learning and leadership development derived from play. Future studies will need to explore the possible reciprocal effects of play, safety, and leadership development.

Play as Contributing to Personal and Relational Growth

Leadership development programs that focus on personal growth are reported to have a strong effect on individuals, because much of the work is done on an emotional level (Conger, 1992; Petriglieri, 2011). One aspect of personal development in becoming a leader is closely related to the issue of the formation of a leadership identity. According to a recent theory of leadership identity development (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), leader and follower identities become socially constructed and form the basis of leader–follower relationships in a process of identity work in which individuals actively "claim" an identity and others affirm or "grant" that identity. *Claiming* refers to the actions people take to assert their identity as either a leader or follower, whereas *granting* refers to the actions that a person takes to bestow an identity (i.e., leader or follower) onto another person (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Hence identities are seen as flexible states frequently in movement (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, in the process of leadership development, individuals interact in the interplay of claims and grants to explore their identity as leaders.

The literature on identity construction in leadership (e.g., DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Luhrmann & Eberl, 2007) suggests that claiming and granting tactics can vary on two basic dimensions: verbal–nonverbal (i.e., a person making statements that he or she is a leader vs. manipulating physical artifacts associated with leadership or followership) and direct–indirect (sitting at the head of a conference table vs. dropping the name of an influential organizational leader). When a focal person claims a leader or follower identity, this stimulates other people in the social environment to consider seeing that focal person in accordance with that particular identity. They communicate their acceptance of this perception by granting that particular identity to the focal person through their words or actions (directly or indirectly). Although this granting of the identity may not always occur immediately and may even require several claims before the identity is granted, the relational recognition of the claim through a reinforcing grant is essential to identity construction. This process of claiming and granting a leadership identity is central to the process of leadership development and growth. Thus, play can be a good context for the reversing of claims and grants dynamics in the process of developing a leadership identity. Being involved in play in a leadership development process is a good oppor-

tunity to test and experience claiming and granting dynamics.

Huizinga (1955) noted that play is about stepping out of ordinary reality into a "higher order," where one can imagine oneself as someone different, more attractive, courageous, and daring. The power of play is about the symbolic representation of self as the embodiment and actualization of what one has imagined oneself to be and become (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). Child psychologists note that play serves as rehearsal, a form of preparation for the future (e.g., Miller, 1973; Sutton-Smith, 1997). When children play at being "mummy" or "doctor," they are rehearsing possible future identities. Likewise, when adults play, they are rehearsing future possibilities. Recently, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) explored the relationship between play and the enactment of novel and not yet fully elaborated identities at work. Their concept of "identity play" describes an identity process that generates variety, rather than consistency, and is aimed at creating future possibilities, rather than at maintaining existing identities and integrating them with external role demands. Their work builds on theories of adult development (Levinson, 1978), organizational socialization (Van Mannen & Schein, 1979), and individual development (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) that suggest that playful behavior is the underlying mechanism animating transitions between past and future identities. Identity play occurs at the threshold of current and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Ashforth (1998) posited that individuals hold desired possible selves at a distance, "playing with" their identification with them until they can adopt them as authentic identities. This distancing combined with the "just for fun" element of play facilitates a feeling of safety within which the individual can freely experiment with the identity in question. Similarly, in organizational research, Brown and Starkey (2000) conceptualized play as a range of activities that allow organizational members to explore the threshold between the current situation and future possibilities. Based on these preliminary ideas, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) suggested that identity play involves the crafting and provisional trial of immature and unelaborated possible selves. Identity play aims to explore possible selves rather than to claim and be granted desired or ought selves, since play processes generate variety, not consistency. Identity play is concerned with inventing and reinventing oneself, and becoming according to one's own internal motives and guidelines. By contrast, identity work strives for the preservation of existing identities or compliance with externally imposed image requirements.

This suggests that play may have a central role in leadership development processes, since it can enable individuals to become involved in identity play in which they are able to experiment, invent and re-envision themselves in the role of leadership by claiming different leadership identities. Furthermore, claiming various novel possible leadership identities may result in granting these identities or rejecting them by others who participate in the process, and this may lead to future shifts and changes in individuals' leadership identities. This can also enable individuals to take risks and attempt to claim leadership in various situations that they would not have dared to try in circumstances that did not involve play. In situations of leadership development that allow for play, individuals can become aware of what enables them to claim leadership, how and when it is granted, the boundary conditions that allow them to lead, and when they may be denied leadership. This can further their ability to develop as leaders. Thus, types of play that encourage identity play, such as role-play, simulations, and outdoor experiences, which provide structures in which the individuals have the opportunity to explore a new role, position, or leadership behavior, are likely to foster the development of a leader identity.

Proposition 2a: Play that enables identity play will positively relate to the development of a leader identity.

Apart from leader development at the individual level, which centers on the individualized self and is aimed at enhancing human capital to enable leaders to develop an intrapersonal sense of competence, play can also allow for leadership development that enhances social capital in an interpersonal-social context. At this level leadership involves relational and collective self-construal (Kark & Shamir, 2002; Lord & Hall, 2005).

Relational or interpersonal self-identities are based on relationships between the individual and important others. A leader with an active relational identity thinks of the self relative to relationships with followers, or other leaders and collective self-concepts, and defines the self in terms of membership in important groups or organizations. For example, a leader with a collective self-concept defines the self in terms of organizational membership or leadership within a particular group or team. Lord and Hall (2005) proposed that as leaders develop, their identities expand from the individual to include relational and then collective levels. Thus, leader identity is thought to change in terms of its underlying level of inclu-

siveness, ranging from least inclusive (individual) to most inclusive (collective) as a function of the developmental process. They suggest that shifts in level of identities occur in parallel with the development of leadership knowledge structures and social processes (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Apart from the different levels of identity of the individual leader, leadership can also be perceived as a characteristic of the group. Theorists have begun recently to conceptualize leadership as a broader, mutual influence process independent of any formal role or hierarchical structure and diffused among the members of any given social system (e.g., Collinson, 2006; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Theories of shared leadership, dispersed leadership, and relational leadership have developed, conceptualizing leadership as a shared property of the group such that all its members, regardless of their formal role or position, participate in the leadership process (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Individuals and groups who conceptualize leadership as a process that can be shared and mutually enacted among group members approach the process of leadership identity development differently. Given group members' beliefs that more than one leader can emerge in a group, individuals will likely grant another's claim of leadership, but at the same time may claim leadership for themselves, and thus reciprocal support can be obtained from others. In such situations leader and follower identities involve a dynamic exchange of leadership and followership that is constantly being renegotiated across time and situations. In such contexts the boundaries between leader and follower identities are permeable; as a result, few identity conflicts and little tension over leadership will emerge (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Various types of play are communal and social in nature. These are enacted in small or large groups and call for interpersonal, within-group and between-groups interactions as well as coordination, collaboration, alignment, understanding of the others' play motives, and other aspects that may characterize group play. This type of play can contribute meaningfully to leadership development at levels of the relational and collective self and can also enhance shared and distributed leadership. Play has been conceptualized as a major organizing principle of human culture and civilization. According to Huizinga (1955), cooperative interactions of play lay the groundwork for human culture (e.g., rituals, contests, games, art, language, governance, and science). Sandelands (2010), for example, suggests that play is a form of human community rather than a form of individual life. He contends that play builds a community in various ways. First, it involves synchrony, by the coordinated movement of individuals in time and space. Second, it involves attraction, because play is enjoyable and "fun" (Abramis, 1990) and is something people like to "join in." Third, play is a form of selflessness, because in play, the boundaries that usually isolate one person from another are overcome by the mutual interaction of play and the fact that the individual welcomes the human community into his or her being (Sandelands, 2010). Thus, certain types of play that are enacted in a communal and social manner can enhance community building and the development of a shared leadership identity.

Similarly, Kolb and Kolb (2010) found in a case study that through play and intergenerational replication of play spaces, individuals involved in a game and in play are able to develop a sense of "communal identity." Thus, through the process of play in leadership development processes, individuals in a group can explore in a context of more permeable interpersonal boundaries and experience a sense of selflessness, thus developing a more communal identity. In such a situation group members can experiment with simultaneous claiming and granting dynamics, play dynamically with role reversion while exchanging leadership, explore the spaces between individuals and different power structures to develop a more complex perspective of group leadership, shared leadership, and individual leadership that is more communal and relational.

This suggests that involvement in various forms of group play that enable identity play and call for group coordination, collaboration, and taking turns in leading and following among group members is likely not only to develop the individual leader and his or her individualized sense of self and intrapersonal growth, but also likely to contribute to the development of a relational and collective self and possibly to the development of a relational and collective self. Furthermore, play can also contribute to the development of shared and collective leadership, as well as relational and fluid structures of leadership within a community.[5]

Proposition 2b: Play in a group setting that enables identity play will positively relate to the development of (i) a relational leadership identity, (ii) a

[5] Competitive group play may limit this effect, although play that is constructed as a competition between subgroups may lead to shared leadership within these subgroups. Thus, the role of competition has to be further explored in future studies.

collective leadership identity, and (iii) a shared leadership identity.

Play as Contributing to Conceptual and Cognitive Development

A second major component of leaders and leadership development according to Conger (1992) is related to the development of cognitive and conceptual aspects of leadership. In his analyses of "learning to lead," Conger focuses more narrowly on programs that teach individuals conceptual and theoretical models as frameworks they can use to think of leadership and gain awareness by understanding what leadership really is. More broadly, this perspective can be seen as focused on the development of individuals' cognitive and conceptual abilities as leaders.

Most contemporary theories and discussions on leadership concur that leadership roles are changing to accommodate the new demands prompted by advances in technology, an increasingly heterogeneous workforce, intensely felt competition from other corporations, and the weakening of geopolitical borders. According to Kanter (1997), managerial work is undergoing such enormous and rapid change that many managers are reinventing their profession as they go. With little precedent to guide them, they are watching hierarchy fade away and the clear distinctions of title, task, department, and even corporation blur. Faced with extraordinary levels of complexity, they watch traditional sources of power erode and the old motivational tools lose their magic (see also Senge, 1990). The rapid changes and increased complexity of the work environment, as well as periods of crisis (e.g., Shamir & Howell, 1999), are compelling managers to invent and adopt new management conceptualizations and tactics. Under these circumstances, the structured learning of management traditions and existing techniques is not necessarily beneficial, since traditional ways to solve problems and lead may not fit the changing reality and challenges that managers face today.

In such turbulent environments where organizations must continually adapt, innovate, and reinvent themselves, leaders must be flexible enough to learn from mistakes, change their assumptions and beliefs, and refine their mental models. One of the most important competencies for successful leadership in changing situations is the ability to learn from experience and adapt to change (Argyris, 1991; Dechant, 1990; Mumford & Connelly, 1991). This competency involves "learning how to learn," which is individuals' ability to introspectively analyze their own cognitive processes (e.g., the way they define and solve problems) and to find ways to improve them. Earlier studies have shown that the ability to learn and innovate is an important leadership success factor (e.g., Yukl, 2010). This suggests that two important cognitive factors for leadership development are the ability to be involved in learning processes and the ability to be creative and innovative. Play has been shown to have a major role in these processes.

Play and Learning

Studies in education, psychology, and ethology suggest that play may have a major role in development and learning. From childhood to maturity, play is central to each stage of development in its different forms, styles, and meanings (Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Theories of play define stimulus-seeking activity that leads to two distinctive modes of play and learning. In the first mode (epistemic) the child's attitude is that of seriousness and focus, followed by intense, attentive investigation of all aspects of a toy. Once the investigation is over, the child then proceeds to the second mode (ludic) in which the toy is handled playfully. As children transition to the second mode in a relaxed manner they proceed to apply the knowledge gained through investigation in their play (Ellis, 1973; Mellou, 1994).

Recent developments in neuroscience reveal how play is connected to the internal functioning of the brain of information processing. The epistemic mode of behavior seems to correspond to the left hemisphere of the brain, which is abstract, symbolic, analytic, and logical, whereas the second mode (ludic behavior) may be associated with the right hemisphere, which is synthetic, concrete, analogical, nonrational, spatial, intuitive, and holistic (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). This is similar to Zull's (2002) description of how brain functioning follows the process of experiential learning. Studies of animal play in neuroethology suggest that humans and other mammals share similar play behaviors associated with their neural plasticity (Height & Black, 2000). A cross species comparative study suggests that play has a central role in brain development, facilitating the integration of cognitive, social, affective, and sensorimotor systems in mammals (Bekoff & Byers, 1998; Smith, 1982). Furthermore, play has been suggested to enhance learning of complicated fields, to contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge, and to synthesizing of distinct concepts and memory processes (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Similarly, cognitive developmental theories of play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978, 1997) emphasize

the role of play in the children's cognitive development, creativity, innovation, and adaptive flexibility. Through an extensive observation of children's play, Piaget (1962) contended that in early childhood, cognitive development occurs partially through play. For Piaget, play provides a rich context in which children interact with the environment and create their own knowledge about the world. For Vygotsky (1978), play constitutes a primary context for cognitive development and the capacity for self-regulation for children. Learning to create a constraint-free situation, molded to fit the child's own set rules, and learning to control impulsive actions, thus give rise to the development of the child's ego.

Theories of learning also value play. According to Kolb and Kolb (2010; Kolb, 1984) play exemplifies one of the highest forms of the experiential learning process in three fundamental ways. First, it encourages learners to achieve authentic and higher order learning by taking responsibility for their learning through creating game rules and conduct standards for themselves. Second, equal value is placed on the process and the outcome of learning. A truly educational experience is one that sees no difference between utility and fun, the process and outcome. Third, in play, the experiential learning cycle is fully engaged by allowing players to come back to a familiar experience with a fresh perspective. The recursive nature of the play enables the individual to mature gradually. Thus, play can be a central form of deep learning.

According to Kolb and Kolb (2010) deep learning can be nurtured within formal organizational settings insofar as the work context allows participants to express themselves in authentic ways, self-organize, and create boundaries for recursive, timeless play. This suggests that in leadership development processes, the ability of managers to learn new ways of thinking, explore with new conceptions, reevaluate their decisions, make better use of their cognitive abilities, stay in a curious mode, and become involved in the processes of deep learning can be largely enhanced by a developmental context that allows for play in a safe space.

Play and Creativity

The ability to play is crucial for today's leadership and management, since it can enhance leaders' ability to be creative and promote ongoing innovation and organizational change. Modern organizations have been described as systems of continual self-renewal in which "change" is a routine process rather than an outcome or endstate (Marshall, Mobley, & Calvert, 1995). Many scholars have defined leadership as different from management, contending that management promotes stability, preservation of the status quo, order and efficiency and is risk averse, whereas leadership seeks to promote organizational change, creativity and innovation (Kotter, 1990; Yukl, 2010). For organizations to change and develop, we need to develop leaders that can encourage ongoing experimentation, risk taking, openness, creativity, authenticity, imagination, and innovation (Kofman & Senge, 1993).[6] The distinction between management and leadership has resulted in attempts by many leadership training programs to focus on developing individuals' ability to take risks, and think in a creative and innovative manner to become better leaders.

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In line with this perception of leadership, many proponents contend that for managers to be successful in today's environments they must recover a "beginner's mind" (Chawla, 1995) or the "mind of a child" (Kofman & Senge, 1993; Senge, 1990) filled with curiosity, wonder and exploration, to limit the effect of institutionalized paradigms and practices (Bokeno, 2010).[7] As Kofman and Senge (1993: 15) noted: "When we fail to recognize [the principle of 'becoming'], we lose the capacity to learn . . . lose the child within us who lives in awe . . . ." The metaphor of a "child's mind" defines an approach characterized by curiosity, wonder, exploration, innocence, and questioning, by contrast with the "adult's mind" which is dominated by the con-

[6] Various leading consulting firms use play to enhance creativity. One example is IDEO, which is depicted in the firm's Website as follows: "At IDEO, we believe in the power of play. It is an essential part of our approach: We use playfulness to design fun, inspiring experiences. . . and to bring elements of delight to more "serious" experiences for adults . . .The latter may even include developing new methods for the workplace, such as helping clients boost the creativity of their innovation processes" (http://www.ideo.com/expertise/play/).

[7] Although it may not be essential for every leader to be creative and promote change, most managers need to lead processes in which change occurs and need to have the ability to think creatively or foster creativity among their team members. Many leadership training programs aim to contribute to individuals' ability to be creative.

straints of work, and by fragmented, reactive and competitive managerial practices (Bokeno, 2010). According to Winnicott (1971), play provides an opportunity for thinking spontaneously, using one's imagination, transforming fragments of reality into a world full of action and adventure, skipping over missing information, and coping creatively with complex and unpredictable situations. One central attribute of play is flexibility. Situations fraught with uncertainty are experienced as intolerable, and they generally lack playfulness (Perroni, 2002).

Leadership development programs that encourage managers to play and behave playfully prompt the "child's mind" to come to the fore. This can help managers to develop and draw on an alternative way of thinking as leaders, and can enable them to better adapt to the need for constant transition, change, innovation, and creativity. Furthermore, leadership development programs that make use of play can enhance leaders' ability in difficult situations of uncertainty to hold on to a sense of playfulness. When leaders are able to experience a sense of play in such situations, bring to the fore the metaphor of play, and think of the situation in ways that highlight aspects of play, it can help them maintain a more flexible and enjoyable perspective and to experience and transform uncertain and difficult situations into ones that are challenging and not intimidating and anxiety provoking. Furthermore, framing the situation as one that can call for play may enable managers to more easily skip over missing information and cope with complex and unpredictable situations creatively in a flexible, playful manner

More specifically, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) suggested that play is of paramount importance for creativity at work, and that one of the ways play enhances creativity is through its contribution to cognitive processes. They propose that play facilitates five creativity-relevant cognitive processes: problem framing, divergent thinking, mental transformations, practice with alternative solutions, and evaluative ability. For example, problem framing determines how a problem will be solved, since there is a higher likelihood that problems that are presented in a unique way will have novel solutions. Play provides the ability to redefine a situation. Its betwixt-and-between reality defamiliarizes the elements of a given activity, increasing the possibility of different framing. Furthermore, the loose and flexible association between means and ends in play encourages people to explore novel directions and avoid the paths that are already known. This suggests that managers who are involved in play and can experiment with different and not-expected ways to frame problems and with novel thoughts and ideas are likely to develop as more creative, change-oriented leaders.

Furthermore, play achieves creativity by facilitating intrinsic motivation. Current research on work and play and on the creative process suggests that when individuals are in a state of play they experience a sense of enjoyment and flow and are likely to behave in a creative manner (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Kauanui, Thomas, Sherman, & Waters, 2010). According to Brown and Vaughan (2009), play opens people up to new possibilities and is at the core of creativity and innovation.

Overall, play in the leadership development processes is likely to help managers tap into their imagination and "inner child" to facilitate flexibility; contribute to cognitive processes that boost ongoing learning, creativity, and innovation; and enable them to build the resources needed to lead change in today's turbulent and constantly changing organizational climate.

Proposition 3a: Play will positively relate to leader development of conceptual and cognitive abilities (e.g., leaders' ability to learn and their levels of creative thinking).

Apart from developing the individual leader's cognitive abilities, play may also contribute to leadership development of cognitive abilities in two directions. First, it can help leaders to structure an organizational context that enables followers' learning, knowledge sharing, and creativity. Second, it can contribute to the development of conceptual and cognitive skills at the group level in teams in which leadership is shared.

Models of relational and shared leadership have focused on specific types of interactions that lead to mutual learning and greater shared interactions, facilitating team and organizational learning (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Marsick & Watkins, 1999). There is growing recognition that leadership depends not only on the individuals' ability to learn, question assumptions, understand concepts, and think of novel directions for themselves, but also on their ability to create conditions where collective learning can occur and processes such as organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) are less likely to occur. Collective learning occurs when the dialogue between individuals within a group develops and members are able to move from taking in the bounds of what is expected and will not endanger them (talking nice) to speaking their minds, engaging in debate, sharing knowledge, and participating in a generative dia-

logue in which new ideas are co-created (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003).

Group and organizational learning and team creativity are among the cognitive abilities leadership training programs focus on developing. This is because new products and processes necessitate synthesizing the experience and expertise of all members involved. *Team creativity* is defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas based on collaborative exchange of perspectives, thoughts, and information (Paulus, Dzindolet, & Kohn, in press). Thus the effective running of an organization is typically a shared leadership activity where team members have both individual and collective responsibility for the effective functioning of the organizational system (O'Reilly, Snyder, & Boothe, 1993).

Much of the research on the actual performance of groups has demonstrated that there are many factors that hinder group learning, knowledge sharing, and creativity. There are several facets of the collaborative process that may reduce motivation and effective information exchange. Team meetings may limit the team members' ability to express their ideas because of production blocking, evaluation apprehension, and social loafing (e.g., Nijstad & Stroebe, 2006), convergence of the performance in the direction of low performers, and focus on information they have in common rather than their unique expertise (Stasser & Titus, 1985). Team diversity many times may also not benefit group learning, knowledge sharing, and creativity (e.g., Mannix & Neale, 2005). This may partly be due to a lack of interest, sharing, or understanding among individuals who differ in their areas of expertise. Leadership appears to play an important role in organizing, facilitating, and cultivating processes that enable the team to tap the diverse potential of its members and exhibit a high level of creativity (e.g., Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Shin & Zhou, 2007). Various studies have shown that leaders can facilitate dialogue, knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing in teams in various ways by providing a supportive and relationally positive context, encouraging trust, cooperation, idea exchange, and joint decision-making processes (e.g., Carmeli & Waldman, 2010; Collins & Smith, 2006).

Participating in leadership training processes that incorporate group play is likely to contribute to the development of cognitive abilities of mutual learning, knowledge sharing, and group creativity. This is mainly because play can be a strong force in helping teams overcome the blocks to group learning and creativity. First, being involved in play in a group setting can lead to a sense of "communal identity" and community (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). This triggering of the collective self and the communal aspects can help individuals build bridges across differences and allow for individuals from different backgrounds and diverse characteristics to join in and interact in a playful mode, enabling each member to contribute his or her unique ideas and perspectives to the group.

Second, when playing, a group is likely to experience flow. *Flow* is a state of consciousness in which people feel completely involved in an activity to the point where they lose awareness of self, place, and all other irrelevant input. It can lead to deep concentration and a vibrant sense of mastery and coordination (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Due to their focus of attention in play and intense concentration on the present moment, individuals are not likely to have time or available mental space to worry about failing or what others may think of them (Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Thus, group play that enables flow will contribute to participants' ability to interact more freely together, focus on the task, overcome members' silence, share knowledge, and overlook power differences. Group play may also help the group overcome the fear of evaluation and think more creatively together, thus contributing to the abilities of a shared leadership team.

Third, play and "fun" in a group context involves attraction, sharing with others, and a sense of selflessness and coordination (Sandelands, 2010). This can limit the process of social loafing experienced in groups and enable better knowledge sharing (Kolb & Kolb, 2010).

The above suggests that managers who have experienced play in leadership development processes can use a more playful orientation in their teams' meetings and capitalize on this playful mode to build a safer environment for team members to interact. Furthermore, managers who have taken part in group play in development programs and have understood the power and meaningful dynamics play can provide in the group context, can further transfer their knowledge to building playful team interactions in their units and can contribute to enhanced levels of team knowledge sharing and team creativity. Last, management teams who share leadership can foster the conceptual and cognitive abilities of their team through experimentation with play.

Proposition 3b: Play in a group setting will positively relate to leadership development of conceptual and cognitive aspects of shared leadership (e.g., team learning, team knowledge sharing, and team creativity).

Play as Contributing to the Development of Leadership-Relevant Skills

One definition of *leadership* is a set of behaviors that are different from management behaviors and may be exercised at any formal level (e.g., Kotter, 1990). This definition focuses on the behaviors and skills of the leader. According to this perspective, leadership entails the mastery of numerous behaviors and domain-relevant skills. Research on leadership characteristics has identified several skills that are related to the advancement and effectiveness of leaders. For example, leaders need technical skills that include knowledge about methods, processes, and equipment to conduct the specialized activities of their organizational unit, as well as social skills that include knowledge about human behavior, group processes, and the ability to understand feelings and motivations (Yukl, 2010). According to Conger (1992), one of the major aims of leadership development programs is to develop leadership through skill building. Skill building programs are designed to identify key leadership skills that are needed and foster the learning of these complex skills in workshops or in on-the-job training.

Various researchers have stressed differences in skill priorities at different stages and levels of the organizational authority and hierarchy (e.g., Mumford & Connelly, 1991; Mumford, Marks, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000). The skills needed to lead a team for the first time are different from those needed to lead multiple business units or a large firm. Advancement in leadership roles is often related to advancement along the lifecycle of stages of adult development that profoundly influence an individual's professional developmental agenda (Guillen & Ibarra, 2009; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). These changes in role and life stage incorporate challenges of transitioning into new leadership roles or further developing in an existing one (McCall, 2004). This suggests that the need to learn and master new skills is an ongoing essential element in the process of developing leader and leadership competencies.

Play is often seen as practice for skills needed in the future. According to animal researchers, when animals play-fight, they are practicing to fight or hunt for real later on. Play allows pretend reversal for the challenges and ambiguities of life, a reversal in which life and death are not at stake (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Support for this notion comes from studies of animals in the wild. After carefully documenting the play behavior of the Alaskan grizzlies over more than 15 years, a research team found that bears that played the most were the ones who survived best. This is true despite the fact that playing takes away time, attention, and energy from other activities such as hunting and eating, which seem at first glance to contribute more to the bears' survival (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Through play, individuals are able to examine new behaviors, reverse and experiment with different skills they may need to develop, reinforce and refine in the context in which they lead or as they transition into a new leadership role or context. As noted by Senge (1990: 314): "when they play with dolls, children rehearse ways of interacting with people. When they play with blocks, they teach themselves basic principles of spatial geometry and mechanics. Later in life they will learn the general properties of the pendulum through swinging on a swing . . . Through experimentation. . . . children discover principles and develop skills that are relevant in reality beyond play."

Relevant leadership skills comprise individuals' knowledge and expertise in their role as leaders and provide a set of cognitive pathways for the individual to follow in approaching his or her work. Play can help attain and enhance leadership skill development in a few ways. First, play contributes to the development of relevant skills because it minimizes the potential for negative consequences of learning by providing a less risky situation. By uncoupling means from ends, play fosters the exploration of task-related behaviors and variables which would be less likely to be tried in other situations, such as when people carry out tasks for external evaluation and reward (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). This safety stimulates risk taking and learning from errors (Glynn, 1994). Errors are used in play as triggers for exploration and practice, allowing individuals to perfect their skills and to discover unnoticed variables or opportunities in some of the most troublesome parts of work (Nachmanovitch, 1990; Schrage, 2000). Systemic failure promotion in organizations has been conceptualized to foster learning, adaptation to changing conditions, and the development of resilience when confronting unknown future change (Sitkin, 1992). Play may allow for experimentation with small failures, and thus, enhanced skill development. In the words of Sitkin (1992: 241): ". . . experience with small varied failure reduces the likelihood that unanticipated changes will spark a self-defeating, threat-rigidity response." Thus, through play, players can acquire valuable and novel information that can enable them to refine leadership skills and to broaden the repertoire of skills available.

Second, skill development is facilitated when individuals are excited about the task, engage in it primarily to master it, and are challenged to an optimal level by it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Play contributes to individuals' vitality, that is, the subjective experience of having energy, feeling alive, and fully functioning. It is an affective experience that encompasses approaching tasks with excitement, energy, enthusiasm, and vigor and not doing things halfway or halfheartedly. Psychologically, this state of aliveness makes a person feel that his or her actions have meaning and purpose (Kark & Carmeli, 2009). People who feel high levels of vitality tend to view events positively and invest more effort in activities and tasks and feel higher levels of work engagement (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Thus, when individuals and managers have a high level of energy, vitality, and engagement, they are likely to invest in their learning and practice of skills as leaders and master the needed skills.[8]

Third, play is one way in which individuals can gain experience and experiment with skills they need to learn, then further develop them by ongoing rehearsal. Learning from experience has been thought of as one of the major ways in which leaders can develop (McCall, 2004). The voluntary exercise of control systems in play allows people not only to select an initial optimal balance between challenges and skills, but also to gradually adjust the level of optimal balance to continue practicing their skills at continuously higher levels of mastery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As Brown and Vaughan (2009: 143) noted: "People cannot succeed in rising to the highest levels of their field if they don't enjoy what they are doing, if they don't make time for play. Without some sense of fun and play people cannot make them selves stick to any discipline long enough to master it." Thus, various types of play that allow for experimenting with tasks and skills that are needed on the job are likely to enhance leadership development by learning from experience.

Although play can take the form of a structured experience in a leadership development program that is designed to facilitate the development of a specific relevant leadership skill, play can also further be practiced on the job, as engagement with work tasks (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), which allows individuals to improve their leader-relevant skills on the job.

[8] Higher levels of energy can also form within organizational networks (Cross, Baker, & Parker, 2003), and enhance practice and skill building at the group level, possibly contributing to team or shared leadership.

As noted by Day and coauthors (Day, 2000; Day & Harrison, 2007), play can contribute to leader development by enhancing individual-level intrapersonal skills (e.g., self-regulation, building an inspiring vision), but the mechanisms above can also explain how play can contribute to experimenting and practicing more complex leadership skills at the interpersonal level (e.g., developing high-quality connections, building strong social networks, working more effectively with diverse groups of people of different ethnic, racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds). Furthermore, play can contribute to the development of leadership-relevant skills at the group level, by allowing individuals to experience through play the skills needed for shared leadership (e.g., taking turns in leading, coordination, and alignment and the division of tasks of shared leadership).

Proposition 4a: *Play will positively relate to leader development of intrapersonal leadership skills (e.g., decision making, self-regulation, building an inspiring vision).*

Proposition 4b: *Play in a group setting will positively relate to leadership development of (i) interpersonal skills (e.g., emotional intelligence, building of high-quality connections and conflict management), and (ii) leadership skills of shared leadership (e.g., taking turns in leading, coordination, and the division of tasks of shared leadership teams).*

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

I have explored the importance of play for the development of leadership, suggesting that play can contribute to both leader and leadership development and can have a meaningful role in enhancing leaders' personal and relational growth, cognitive abilities, and leadership-relevant skill building. More specifically I propose that play can contribute to the development of leadership identity at the individual, relational, and collective levels of self, through the process of identity play. Furthermore, play can be a major factor in enabling leaders to engage in deep ongoing learning and in creative processes. It can also contribute to leaders' ability to enhance learning at the group level and foster knowledge sharing and team creativity, as well as contribute to cognitive abilities of shared leadership teams. Finally, play contributes to leader and leadership skill development at different stages of career and transitions.

The framework presented here further suggests that play is likely to contribute best to leader and leadership development when it is enacted in a safe space. Most organizational settings, including leadership development programs, can create play spaces that provide holding, psychological safety, relief from the pressure of social validation, and suspension of evaluation only to a limited extent. However, the more leadership development programs and structured processes are constructed as safe play spaces that provide psychological safety and legitimize exploration, the more individuals may benefit from play. This suggests that consultants and teachers of leadership should give greater thought to the construction of the context (play space) in which individuals are invited to play. The messages conveyed in this context in terms of the safety level (e.g., Is this an evaluation-free context? Will the information that is revealed in the training process stay confidential?) is likely to impact the possible benefits play may have on leader and leadership development. Furthermore, the climate that develops in the process between the facilitator and participants and among the group of participants (e.g., one that encourages free exploration and enjoyment from play or one in which there is criticism) will affect the possible developmental outcomes related to play. Thus, structuring a safe play space is central to consultants' and trainers' ability to enable managers to benefit from play.

In today's organizational climate in which managers are assessed and evaluated at every move, they are at risk of losing their ability for flexible, imaginative, innovative, and progressive thinking. The play metaphor has the potential to encourage managers to switch gears from administrators primarily concerned with damage control to inventive leaders interested in creating and in change. The notion of play, if incorporated into leadership development programs, may be of value, since it may enable managers not only to enhance their leadership capabilities and enjoyment of training programs but also to weave play and the benefits derived from it into their day-to-day managerial work. Furthermore, the effect of play can also contribute to leaders' ability to enhance play and playfulness in the organization, by building cultures that further allow employees to experience a more humanistic work experience through a relational culture which fosters growth and contributes to employees' psychological well-being and health.

Different forms and types of play may lead to different leader and leadership outcomes. Leadership training programs that incorporate play have to choose the types of play they use according to the outcomes they aim to attain. For example, the need to develop a leadership identity may call for different forms of play than the need to develop relevant skills. Furthermore, if the target is the development of shared leadership, different forms of play will contribute in comparison with play used to foster individual focused leadership. Thus, leadership training programs should adjust the type of play used to fit the program's aims.

The play metaphor has the potential to encourage managers to switch gears from administrators primarily concerned with damage control to inventive leaders interested in creating and in change.

Building on the literature on both life and role-cycle transitions, Guillen and Ibarra (2009) suggest that leadership development interventions must take into account whether the person is in a transitional or stable period with regard to his or her role. More specifically, they asserted that in transitional periods, which are typically highly emotional, one of the biggest challenges managers face is giving up what made them successful in the past and learning how to work in real time. In such times there may be a need to apply types of play that allow individuals to experiment with new leader identities such as role-play and simulations that are focused on situations that more tightly mimic their new work context and the dilemmas they will encounter. This will allow them, through play, to consider and confront the demands of the new role, as well as to go through a process of continuous evaluations and refinements of their identity, cognitions, and skills in the role. Furthermore, in such situations managers may benefit more highly from play that is focused on the interpersonal level (leader development), before they are able to consider interpersonal skills and leadership sharing (leadership development).

In stable periods, by contrast, people seek to deepen leadership role-related skills, or to take advantage of their experience in-role to broaden their repertories and to challenge points of weakness (Guillen & Ibarra, 2009). In such situations play that is focused on unfamiliar contexts may help people to solve familiar problems differently, and play that is focused on risk taking may contribute to self-renewal, by infusing routine activities with new meanings and directions. Thus, play such as outdoor experiences, imaginative play, and simulations that relate to unfamiliar contexts

and roles may yield the highest payoffs. Furthermore, at this stage, managers may be better prepared to deal with complexity and can focus on the development of interpersonal and group-level (relational and shared) leadership abilities. This can contribute to their ability to further develop and make shifts in their leadership style. Thus, consultants, teachers, and managers should consider what type of play is relevant for each career stage.

Although learning from experience has been thought of as one of the major ways in which leaders can develop, McCall (2004: 128) points out that "[p]eople don't automatically learn from experience. They can come away with nothing, the wrong lessons, or only some of what they might have learned." This is true for engagement in play as well. To allow people to benefit and learn the most from experience necessitates time and space for "inner work" and reflection, to deepen awareness of one's sense of self and enable consciousness raising. The opportunity to reflect deeply away from the day-to-day rush can contribute to the sense-making processes that enable learning from experience from what otherwise might be perceived as escapist activities (McCall, 2004; Mirvis, 2008; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Snook, 2007). This suggests that for play to contribute to leader and leadership development, it should be coupled with the opportunity to reflect on the play experience and the learning, to raise consciousness and facilitate sense-making processes.

The transfer of knowledge from experiences in play to day-to-day leadership in organizations is not automatic and should also be given thought. The transfer of specific responses from play to future situations occurs only occasionally. There is no guarantee that what occurs in play is applicable to future environmental demands on leaders. The crux is the discipline of maintaining flexibility in behavior and plasticity in mental models, which is facilitated by play. Play allows people to temporarily suspend their mental models and disbelief in favor of exploration and experimentation with various alternative possibilities (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). This allows managers to modify their perceptual limits of the world by imagining and enacting in different ways. This suggests that trainers and teachers who would like managers participating in leadership training programs to benefit the most from play should provide the time and structured processes for reflexivity and for sense making of the experience, as well as time to reflect on possible ways to implement what they have learned in their work context.

The perspective developed here questions the traditional prevalent discourse on the segregation of work and play and between workplace and leisure time and fun, which negates major aspects of the human experience at work. However there are some issues and questions that merit attention in future studies. One of them is the possible dark sides of play in leadership developmental processes. First, play may have a connotation of gambling and may convey the signal that leaders do not take the decisions they have to make or their responsibilities seriously. This in some cases can lead to situations in which managers act as though they were "playing" with the lives of their employees and the business by taking risks and unleashing their desires without considering the possible consequences.

Second, suggesting that play may be a key way to develop leadership may undermine more traditional ways of learning and of formal knowledge and experience. Furthermore, play has drawbacks and may not be suitable to all forms of leadership development. The use of play should be contingent on the expected outcomes. Previous studies have shown that play may not be the best way to learn in situations in which reliability, efficiency, and control of the learner are primary concerns (e.g., Glynn, 1994; Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Schroeder, 1994). However, the same studies have shown that play fosters flexibility, involvement, experimentation, quality in learning, and creativity (Kolb, 1984; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), which are particularly conducive to leaders and leadership. Third, play may lead to a sense of "childification" of leadership which may undermine managers' authority and status.

Fourth, social scientists have noted the potential of play to subvert organized work, its antistructural essence, and its seductive qualities (Mainemelis & Altman, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Turner, 1974). Although these qualities of play may contribute to leaders' ability to enhance change and encourage innovative alternatives to the formal structure, they may also endanger the organization. Finally, there is also the opposite risk. The use of play within the domain of work may reinforce a general move toward the colonization of individuals' inner lives by an institutional logic of effectiveness and productivity. Thus, companies can set up supposed "play spaces" as a subtle form of attaining normative control over their managers.[9]

Another aspect of play that should be viewed cautiously is its relationship to cultural and gendered dynamics. Many play activities, mostly in outdoor settings, are composed of "macho" games

[9] I would like to thank reviewer #2 for suggesting this last point.

and challenges that underscore the experience of "masculinity" and reinforce the association between leadership and masculinity. Given the robust association between leadership and masculinity (e.g., Kark, 2004; Kark & Eagly, 2010), the impact of these leadership development programs on women managers and their potential harm merit further examination.

Furthermore, different personal traits and life experience may enhance or hinder the tendency of individuals to learn and develop as leaders from engaging in play. For example, individuals with a high level of developmental readiness (e.g., learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy and self-concept clarity; Avolio & Hannah, 2008), as well as a high level of openness to experience (LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000) may have a strong tendency to benefit from play, in comparison with individuals who are low on these characteristics.

The current work refers to play in general and does not distinguish between different forms of play and the ways they are used in leadership development programs. Future empirical studies should assess the possible contributions and strengths of different types of play to the leadership development process. According to Guillen and Ibarra (2009) pedagogies used in leadership interventions cannot be generalized to all leaders, "simply cutting-and-pasting them from one population to the other" (3). Methods must be in sync with both job demands and individuals' needs at a particular time and place. This suggests that different leadership development learning methods are suited for the different needs and issues faced by leaders at different level, life, and role stages. Thus, there is a need to further study and understand the possible contribution of play, as well as different forms and types of play, to leadership development for managers at different stages of their careers.

On a final note, today children are expected to grow up at a fast pace, to stop playing at an early age, and to "begin to behave like adults" and learn leadership and management skills (e.g., time management, stress management, business entrepreneurship). Most adults may have not had much experience with free play when they were young. Beginning in preschool, the natural mayhem that 3–5 year olds engage in (normal rough and tumble play) is usually suppressed by a well-meaning preschool teacher and parents who prefer quiet and order to the seeming chaos that is typical of free childhood play (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). This raises the question of whether these children will actually grow up to be superior leaders and managers, or whether they are, paradoxically, missing out on the period of childhood play they need to develop into innovative and flexible leaders. Will these children need to learn to play as adults to become leaders? These questions on the relationship between play in childhood and leadership development constitute intriguing directions for future research. Thus, although play may have some drawbacks, the increasingly popular use of play in leadership development programs indicates its numerous advantages for leadership growth and development in the world of modern management.

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