

THE BENEFIT OF EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING IN DEVELOPING EMOTIONALLY COMPETENT LEADERS

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Abstract

Motivation of study. The recruitment and development of emotionally competent leaders has become an important priority for organizations seeking to sustain growth, maintain a dedicated workforce, or operate in environments requiring leaders to manage personnel under conditions of risk, stress, and emotional strain. This aligns with long standing efforts within leadership research to identify common traits and factors associated with effective leadership (Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 1989; Zaccaro, 2018; Lacarenza et al., 2017). Developing emotional competence may be facilitated through opportunities to experience, reflect on, and regulate one's emotions in practice oriented, experiential learning contexts. Research on developing emotional competence in leaders through education is very limited.

Objective. This study investigates whether an experience based military exercise can influence the development of emotional competence among young military leaders participating in a military bachelor leadership training program.

Context of Study. The military bachelor students completed a week-long exercise designed around staged crisis scenarios, serving alternately in roles such as operations room/crisis staff, force protection, first aid responders, bereavement support to next of kin, and observers. Each day concluded with Holistic debrief sessions emphasizing reflection on emotional responses, peer feedback, and clarification of challenges related to collaboration and interpersonal dynamics.

Method. Data were collected through semi structured, in depth interviews with participants from the training program. All respondents provided informed consent. The material was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Results. Respondents expressed strong support for continued use of experience-based learning exercises. Through a detailed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), three central themes were identified: (1) Benefit from realistic training and sharing vulnerable experiences, (2) Benefits of Experience Based Learning in Relation to Theoretical Instruction, and (3) Emotional Preparedness for Leadership. Although methodological considerations were acknowledged, they were assessed as inconsequential to the core findings. The study recommends future research that explores the perceived long-term effects of such experiential training. Overall, the findings suggest that experiential learning activities that expose students to stress inducing scenarios contribute meaningfully to the development of emotional competence in leadership.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, leader education, developing emotional competence, holistic debrief.*

1. Introduction

The pursuit of effective leadership remains a central concern in organizational research and practice (Fisher-Yoshida, 2022; Morrissett, 1955). Although definitions of successful leadership vary—often shaped by indicators such as profitability or employee satisfaction (Baptiste, 2019)—there is growing recognition that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient. Experience-based learning has increasingly been emphasized as a critical component of leadership development (Bass et al., 2003). This study investigates whether a week of experiential military training, combined with relationship-oriented debriefing, can enhance emotional competence among young military leaders.

1.1. The role of experiential learning and emotions in leadership development

A key challenge in leadership education is the tendency of theory-driven frameworks to overlook the importance of experiential learning. Several institutions have been criticized for insufficient integration of practical learning, despite longstanding calls for such approaches (Buchanan, 2017; Roberts, 2018). Kolb's "Experiential Learning Theory" (ELT) is frequently highlighted as a foundation for structuring such learning, emphasizing the importance of real-world experience within academic contexts (Kolb, 2014). ELT describes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Realism is central to this model, as authentic experiences deepen learning outcomes (Radovic et al., 2021). ELT has been applied successfully across numerous fields—including military education and sports management—where it has improved understanding and application of theoretical content (Brady et al., 2018; Ladyshevsky, 2007; Fredriksen, 2023). By 2021, it had been implemented in more than 30 areas of higher education (Kayes & Kayes, 2021). Empirical research supports the effectiveness of experiential learning compared to traditional instructional methods, particularly within leadership development. Studies demonstrate that such approaches enhance theoretical understanding and academic performance (Leal-Rodriguez & Albort-Morant, 2019). However, despite promising findings, the specific impact of experiential learning on emotional competencies remains underexplored (Gómez et al., 2019).

Emotional intelligence, as defined by Goleman (1998), is essential for regulating personal emotions, understanding others' feelings, and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics. Many leaders lack sufficient emotional competence, resulting in strained workplace relationships (Matjie, 2018). Conversely, individuals with higher emotional competence—such as teachers in demanding environments—report lower stress and burnout (Rey et al., 2016). Emotional experiences also strongly shape memory and learning, suggesting that emotionally charged contexts can strengthen retention and future application of knowledge (Damasio, 2000; 2001). Consequently, leadership training should normalize emotional expression and incorporate structured reflection, particularly in high-stress domains such as healthcare and the military (Edmonson, 2003; Moldjord, Fredriksen and Browning, 2021; Moldjord & Iversen, 2015). Shared reflection further promotes emotional resilience and team cohesion (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Research indicates that emotionally competent leaders build stronger, more resilient teams (Issah, 2018). Nonetheless, leadership education often fails to develop such competence due to limited experiential opportunities (Rennemo & Vaag, 2018). Although some studies suggest that experiential learning can enhance emotional intelligence—especially when accompanied by critical reflection—the existing evidence is limited and often focuses on adolescents whose emotional capacities are still developing (Năstasă et al., 2022). Emotional experiences related to failure may promote growth (Bartsch, 2012; Cope, 2011), but further research is needed to clarify how experiential learning best supports emotional competence in leadership contexts.

2. Method

Utilizing qualitative methods, the research involved observing learning exercises and interviewing cadets to analyze their insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants were all cadets (N 10) at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy (RNoAFA), aged 20 to 23, with equal gender representation. The cadets participated in various roles during the experiential learning exercise, which simulated crisis situations requiring leadership and teamwork.

The exercise featured four different tactical training arenas: managing crisis scenarios in a simulated operating room, responding to staged emergencies, supporting next of kin, and observing peers responsible for debriefing sessions. The debriefs focused on extracting learning from challenges and enhancing teamwork, utilizing a method called Holistic Debrief (Moldjord, 2016; Moldjord & Iversen, 2015).

Interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted approximately 40 minutes each. The semi-structured format allowed for both descriptive and emotional inquiries regarding their experiences and perceived leadership preparedness.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was employed to analyze the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's framework (2006, 2019). The analysis involved five phases: (1) *Familiarization*: Transcribing and reading the interviews to understand the data. (2) *Initial Coding*: Generating codes relevant to the research questions. (3) *Theme Development*: Grouping codes into initial themes, leading to six initial themes. (4) *Reviewing Themes*: Refining themes to ensure clarity and uniqueness. (5) *Defining Themes*: Finalizing three main themes: Benefit from realistic training and sharing of vulnerable experiences, Perceived Benefit of Experience-Based Learning, and Emotional Preparedness for Leadership. The second author supervised the research and provided insights into the educational context. A re-analysis of the transcribed data confirmed the original findings and redefined naming of result themes.

3. Results: Emotional preparedness for leadership

The analysis of interviews conducted with cadets at the RNoAFA yielded three key themes regarding their emotional preparedness for leadership following an experiential learning exercise. All quotes are translated from Norwegian and derived from ten interviews.

3.1. Theme 1: Benefit from realistic training and sharing vulnerable experiences

Cadets expressed strong opinions about the organization and realism of the exercise, which spanned a week and was a significant event in their academic calendar. The exercise aimed to simulate lifelike crisis scenarios with the involvement of staff, observers, and hired actors. One cadet noted, "I thought it was very easy to immerse myself in the situation, much of that was due to the very good acting performance of 'the wounded'" (R3). This sense of immersion was crucial for effective experience-based learning. Another cadet mentioned, "Not knowing the 'victims' made everything feel very real" (R5), indicating that anonymity enhanced the experience's authenticity. The effort placed into crafting realistic scenarios was acknowledged. Some cadets recognized that, despite the realism, it was still an exercise. One remarked, "Deep down you know it is still an exercise, and if it was really happening, I probably would have experienced even more stress" (R3). Nonetheless, other cadets emphasized the seriousness with which they approached the exercise: "Even though the exercise is not real, the reactions of your teammates are real" (R4).

Debrief sessions at the end of each day were viewed positively. They allowed cadets to reflect on technical and emotional aspects, fostering understanding and teamwork. One cadet stated, "I believe it helps to have a way to vent your emotions. If you don't have a debrief, I think you'll go into the next part of the exercise with negative emotions still holding you down" (R1). This sentiment was echoed by others who valued the opportunity to discuss shared experiences and emotions and a desire for more time to discuss emotional experiences (R2). Overall, cadets found the exercise engaging and educational, with one noting, "I feel I have learned a lot, maybe more so than other exercises before it" (R7).

3.2. Theme 2: Perceived benefit of experience-based learning

Cadets believed that experiential learning was more beneficial than theoretical approaches such as lectures and exams. One cadet articulated this idea succinctly: "You can take the theory test, but you can't really learn how to drive before you get in the car" (R7). This sentiment reflects a broader consensus that practical experience is essential for true understanding. Another cadet echoed this, stating, "I wish we had a bit more [experiential exercises]... it makes it easier for me to understand" (R1). Cadets felt that experiential learning provided a new perspective and deeper understanding of academic content. One noted, "If you don't put it into practice, I struggle to pay attention" (R10). Others emphasized that true leadership requires practical experience: "You can learn a lot from the theory, but at the end of the day, you have to try it for yourself" (R2).

While the value of theoretical knowledge was acknowledged, cadets highlighted the importance of combining it with practical experience. One cadet explained that theoretical foundations complement hands-on experiences, enhancing understanding of emotional reactions during leadership (R5). Another emphasized that experiential learning fosters deeper emotional connections to the material, allowing for better retention and application.

3.3. Theme 3: Emotional preparedness for leadership

Cadets reported feeling more prepared for leadership roles due to their emotional experiences during the exercise. One cadet described a pivotal moment during a "mass injury case," where confusion led him to take charge despite feeling unprepared. He learned valuable lessons about delegation and trust, stating, "Trust is crucial to leadership" (R3). This experience underscored the emotional weight of leadership responsibilities. Another cadet echoed this sentiment, noting that the exercise helped him understand how to manage embarrassment and maintain composure in challenging situations. "Leadership in practice is a lot to do with the emotional stuff," he said, highlighting the importance of self-awareness (R4). Even cadets in observation roles found opportunities to learn about leadership. One cadet reflected on how a medic leader's phrasing during a crisis impacted his emotional response, emphasizing the role of communication in leadership (R8). This experience reinforced the idea that effective leadership can also be learned through observation.

Cadets unanimously reported feeling more prepared for future leadership roles. They recognized the value of practical experience in building confidence and understanding. As one cadet stated, "All forms of leadership exercises contribute to giving you experience... and all of that is good preparation." Others noted that the skills learned would be applicable in various organizational contexts, not just in military settings. Overall, the cadets' reflections indicate a significant increase in emotional preparedness for leadership, underscoring the importance of experiential learning in their development.

4. Discussion

This study explored the role of experience-based learning in developing emotionally competent leaders, addressing concerns about overreliance on theoretical instruction in leadership education. The findings highlight the effectiveness of experiential learning at the RNoAFA, as cadets described the training as realistic and immersive, which strengthened their emotional engagement. This aligns with models emphasizing realism as a key component of experiential learning (Radović et al., 2021) and with Kolb's emphasis on concrete experience as the basis for deeper learning (Kolb, 2014).

Cadets reported that hands-on experiences enabled them to connect theoretical concepts to real emotional and interpersonal demands of leadership. While theoretical knowledge provides an essential foundation, experiential practice and subsequent reflection appear to complete the learning process. This is consistent with research showing that experiential methods foster greater emotional engagement than traditional classroom-based approaches (Allcoat & von Mühlenen, 2018). Furthermore, cadets felt more prepared for leadership roles due to the emotional challenges encountered during the exercises. This supports Bartsch's argument that experience combined with guided reflection is essential for developing motivated and emotionally aware leaders (Bartsch, 2012). The structured debrief sessions were particularly valuable in helping cadets process emotional responses and enhance their leadership competence.

The study has limitations, including potential self-reporting bias and the absence of a control group, which restricts generalizability. Future research could compare alumni who experienced experiential training with peers from more traditional programs to examine long-term effects. Overall, this study suggests that experiential learning, when combined with Holistic debriefing, enhances emotional competence and should be considered a vital component of leadership development across contexts.

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