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A Contemporary Approach to Learning Transfer from the Perspective of Constructivist Theory: Marathon Running as a Leadership Development Strategy for Millennial Leaders

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Abstract

This paper includes a literature review of the research on marathon running as a leadership development strategy especially for the millennial leaders while they have a postmodern worldview, searching authentic and innovative solutions and supporting divergent thinking. Furthermore, it points out the importance of learning transfer from the perspective of constructivist theory. In this respect, first, constructivist learning theory and learning transfer are explained. In the next two sections, leadership development for the millennial generation and how marathon running is handled as a leadership development strategy in the literature are determined. At the end of the paper, practical implications for leaders and organizations are suggested.

Keywords: Leadership development, marathon running, constructivist theory, millennial leaders, learning transfer

1. Introduction

The Millennial generation (born 1982–2003), whose dominating presence will make its behaviors the major motif of corporate life in the next decade, are quickly taking on leadership roles [1, 2]. The research indicates that this generation of emergent leaders lack managerial experience, thus their leadership skills are not fully developed. This means that Millennials are being promoted into managerial roles before they are ready and there is a need for ongoing mentorship and coaching to deepen their leadership skills [3–5].

Learning and development opportunities are one of the top things Millennials are looking for in an organization. They want to work for an organization that offers enough development opportunities that will allow them to grow and improve their skills [6, 7]. Besides, they do not see development and training programs offered to them as a sign of weakness, but rather a path to greatness, so to offer them leadership

development training will not only make them better managers but will also excite them [4]. However while this generation has different preferences from prior generations; in terms of how they prefer to learn and how they view the programs they are offered, the organizations who would like to retain millennial talent cater to their unique needs rather than forcing them to fit into pre-existing patterns and practices. Millennials have been taught a postmodern worldview, which makes them have very different ideas about leadership and may lead to some disruption to traditional leadership. They also have different expectations of leadership development programs. Thus, the organizations should create innovative approaches to effective leadership development and offer adequate leadership development for these leaders. This will help their transition into leadership roles so that they are better positioned for success and they will provide long-term value to their organization [8–15].

While leadership learning and development initiatives are increasingly becoming complex in nature, organizations are using innovative and unusual approaches [16]. Innovative leadership development programs are effective, efficient, and establish true leaders because they focus on the stepwise completion of objective assignments that align with business strategy [17]. The present study aims to confirm that leadership development is a continuous process that can take place anywhere [18] and constitutes an answer to the call of Hamilton and Bean [19] who suggest further systematic study of leadership development that will lead to a better understanding of how to create shared meaning in context. Thus it suggests to move away from traditional leadership development courses and develops the core learning experiences from a diverse domain namely marathon running. Leadership and marathon running together provide a knowledge base that integrates understandings from diverse domains with closely linked field experiences to bridge theory and practice. As several authors have established that marathon running and leadership development share experiential commons (e.g. [20–34]), this paper introduces marathon running as an opportunity for human resources executives to facilitate leadership development for the millennial leaders and builds a theoretical foundation for academic studies.

This chapter consists of two main headings. In "Theoretical Background" section, first, the relevant literature on constructivist learning theory, learning transfer and learning transfer from the perspective of constructivist theory are explained. Then leadership development for the millennial generation and how marathon running is handled as a leadership development strategy in the literature are determined. The "Conclusion" section summarizes the results of the investigation and the results of different studies that support the present investigation's results. At the end of the paper, practical implications for leaders and organizations are suggested.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Constructivist learning theory

The contemporary movements in the philosophy of science converge on the idea that knowledge must not be considered an objective representation of an external observer-independent environment ([35], p. 135). Constructivism is a philosophical view on how people come to understand or know ([36], p. 31). Constructivism generally casts learners in an active role. Instead of just listening, reading and working through routine exercises, they discuss, debate, hypothesize, investigate and take viewpoints ([37], p. 7). In this way, they are encouraged to constantly assess how the activity is helping them gain understanding. In ideally

becoming "expert learners" by questioning themselves and their strategies, they obtain ever-broadening tools to keep learning [38].

Currently, many organizations are replacing the traditional classroom-teaching style of training with the constructivist problem-based learning style in professional training. Professional trainers prefer the problem-based learning system, because it facilitates learner autonomy and easier curriculum negotiation. Furthermore, when it is combined with small group work, it includes communication and collaborative skills that are missing in traditional professional education [39].

2.2 Learning transfer

Learning is a process of acquiring ideas, applying these ideas, embodying the ideas, reflecting on our experiences, and refining ourselves and our practice (Yeomans as cited in [40], p. 10). A central and enduring goal of training is to provide learning experiences that are useful beyond the specific conditions of initial learning ([41], p. 431). Transfer of learning refers to the use of past learning when learning something new and the application of that learning to both similar and new situations ([42], p. xiii). In the organizational training and development programs, learning transfer occurs when the learned behavior is generalized to the job context and maintained over a period of time on the job ([43], p. 63). As Fogarty et al. [44] claim, real transfer happens when people carry over something they learned in one context to a significantly different context.

While transfer of learning is the very foundation of learning, thinking, and problem solving ([42], p. xiii) and while transfer is theoretically indistinguishable from learning ([45], p. 109), there is no more important topic in the whole psychology of learning than transfer of learning ([46], p. 2).

2.3 Learning transfer from the perspective of constructivist theory

Transfer of learning enables the application of knowledge learned in one setting or for one purpose to another setting and/or purpose ([47], p. 235). According to constructivist learning theory, the learner is extremely open to new knowledge and reconstructs the information he/she acquired in his/her mind by comparing with the old information and thus begins to understand the world around him/her better ([48], p. 44). Several authors consider learning transfer from a constructivist perspective, where it is highly dependent on how a learner is able to personally integrate and apply lessons learned ([49], p. 86). Thus, it can be asserted that the aim of research on learning transfer is identical to the aim of constructivist approaches that deal with the problem of flexible applicability of knowledge ([50], p. 316). The principles of constructivist theory are also important in the context of adult approaches to learning and have important implications for learning transfer ([51], p. 9).

Although an important characteristic of learning transfer is that it does not necessarily require content overlap between the different domains [52], when the knowledge transfer in human intelligence is examined, it can be found that the individuals do not rely on low-level relatedness to transfer knowledge across domains. They are able to make analogy across different domains by resolving the high level structural similarities even when the learning domains are seemingly irrelevant. Understanding of these structural similarities helps to abstract away the details specific to the domains, and build a mapping between the abstractions. The mapping builds on the high level structural relatedness of the two domains, instead of their low level literal similarities ([53], p. 513).

2.4 Leadership development for millennial leaders

Millennial professionals are one of the most discussed and researched subjects of recent times ([54], p. 148). While they represent the majority of the workforce and about half of the manager population, they are the leaders of today [55]. Research reveals that these generation of leaders will need to be equipped to take leadership positions in organizations sooner than any other generation in history [56] thus training them for leadership is a business necessity now [57].

Leadership was always regarded as a challenge [58]. While the workplace has changed tremendously over the years, the need to develop strong, capable leaders to succeed in this fast-paced organizational environment has remained the same ([59], p. 10). Leadership learning and development is the critical priority in many of today's large, global organizations. As the degree to which an organization's leaders are effective critically affects all aspects of the business, today a more strategic and integrated approach which broadens the traditional view of leadership development and training is an absolute must ([60], p. 4; [61, 62]).

Leadership development is a highly personal learning experience that can provide new and relevant insights into one's strengths as a leader as well as the key areas to work on for further development [63]. As previous research on generational cohorts suggests that managerial practices, human resource management practices, and development strategies should be generation-appropriate [64–66], the human resources executives should architect millennial specific development avenues that accelerate professional growth and streamline success [67].

As millennials are aces at discovering information and they do not value a piece of information for its own sake, rather for its relevance to their lives [68], they are characterized as active learners, sharing the active learning style [69–71]. Research reveals that millennial leaders want experiences, not training. Rather than traditional classroom lectures, they prefer to take action and practice in the context of their real work. They find the traditional leadership development strategies too slow and believe that there is a need to redesign the leadership strategies [72]. Maybe this is because that the Millennials never accept how things were done before and always seek a new way of doing things. Innovation is one of their most attractive stereotypes [73]. The research also revealed that they believe that their organization's leadership development programs were aligned with its business needs. They stated that "poor content, insufficient thinking and expertise from outside sources, and a failure to make a compelling return-on-investment case" were the biggest barriers to training program effectiveness [13]. These findings reveal that the organizations require innovative solutions to create leadership development programs that the employees want and need. Focusing on what participants want is very important to designing any type of learning environment, so researchers and human resource executives need to design contemporary learning methods for the new generation leaders. Traditional leadership development programs generally offer classroom-based instruction pertaining to the theories, attributes, and behaviors of leaders ([74], p. 69). However millennials quickly tire of such training methods, especially if they do not see clear connections between the content and their day-to-day responsibilities. The classroom oriented training is now seen as obsolete, while the modern view is that the new design of training should be personalized, learner-directed, collaborative, interdisciplinary, offering strong connections to business and setting the stage for lifelong learning. Millennials are a cohort that constantly seeks inspiration and want to have fun [75, 76]. Besides, many of them are driven by competition. Thus the idea of incorporating game elements into training may keep them motivated and engaged in their continuous development. The organizations should consider offering this generation of leaders more diverse

and engaging programs which will lead to an evolution in the leadership training and development approaches over time. These programs will not only make them better leaders, but will also excite them [4, 11]. These findings are consistent with the findings of the research which revealed that leadership development should not be simply an exercise in information download but the facilitation of a more self-directed learning process [63] and these programs need an update to reflect today's working world [77]. Research also revealed that 80 percent of business leaders believe that greater innovation was needed in learning techniques used in leadership development programs [13]. While today's world of the millennial leaders calls for a renewed focus on what constitutes genuine leadership development programs aiming to develop leaders ready to get ahead of tomorrow's challenges, it is time to challenge the status quo and push the leadership development efforts to the next level [78]. It is a fact that a leadership development program is only as good as its practical applications [79] and effective leaders learn from significant life experiences, such as inspirational experiences. The strategy of reflection used by leaders in significant life experiences can be utilized as an effective learning tool in leadership development [80].

The organizations should respond to these issues with the enhancement of existing leadership development programs that aim to develop this new generation of leaders. In light of the above discussion and following the notion of thinking about new and creative methods to reach the hearts and minds of the millennial leaders, the present study proposes a novel approach to alleviate the problem of the traditional classroom leadership development programs. More specifically, it aims to integrate the leadership and the learning research and make a contemporary approach to learning transfer from the perspective of constructivist theory in articulating the variety of leadership behaviors desired and clarifying the way learning by an inspirational experience such as marathon running influence those behaviors.

2.5 Marathon running as a leadership development strategy

A marathon is not just a 26.2 mile endurance race to run. In fact the marathon journey is a lot longer than that and it involves a lot more than just running [81].

Leadership is in many ways like marathon running. Numerous characteristics are adequate for both. From boardrooms to meetings, successful leaders often have many marathons against them when it comes to running, literally. Running a marathon which is seen as one of the greatest feats of human endurance [82] and the ultimate human challenge ([83], p. 348), requires continuous learning as does leadership [84]. As leadership development is a process that occurs in contexts, which are value-laden environments ([19, 85], p. 344; [86]), determinants of marathon running success may apply to leaders and offer them parameters of a life-long training regimen for success in this challenging profession of leading. Thus marathon running may constitute 26.2 miles of leadership lessons.

The most fundamental ideal required to understand learning transfer is that two tasks may differ yet share some common components, which provide the basis for intertask transfer ([87], pp. 15–16). Based on this claim, the present study offers a comprehensive list of leadership lessons one can learn by training for and completing a marathon, as well as commentary on the reasons of learning and living those lessons are a requirement for anyone who wants to be a leader.

A marathon is not just running 26.2 miles on race day. It is about putting in roughly 600 miles over a four to six month training period leading up to race day [33]. Crossing the finish line of a marathon is a great feeling. But for many, the journey of getting to the start line is more important than crossing the finish line.

If a runner has decided to take up running or signed up for a marathon, he/she has completed the first step to becoming a marathon runner. A runner should not shy away from taking that first step because he/she is afraid he/she will not be able to achieve his/her goal exactly how he/she pictures it. The first step to goal setting is to have absolute belief and faith in the process [88, 89]. A runner, who gets to the start line, will get to the finish line. While we all are capable of more than we think we are, although to take the first step is also the hardest one for the leaders, a leader should not wait for the moment when everything is in perfect alignment. Once a start is made, the following steps will be slightly easier, and there begins the journey towards achieving the goal. The leader shall align with his/her leadership goal and reach forward by placing one foot in front of the other. Before he/she knows it, he/she will gain momentum and move to the next phase called "second wind". Thus, a leader should focus a lot on getting the projects to the start line. With the support of his/her team, he/she will get it to the finish line [81, 90–92].

Running a marathon is a major commitment. It requires long periods of meticulous planning and a strict physiological and mental training regime [93]. This means several months of arduous, painstaking preparation which includes a careful diet and a regimented program of progressively longer runs [82, 94]. This is a must for the runners so that they know where they are going and that they are focused on establishing and reaching their goal. Aside from focus, it is also important for runners to have a race-day strategy which is based on training data such as total mileage, average pace and races completed during the training period. A solid strategy, careful planning, a strong focus and the ability to stay on the course are keys to success not only in running but also in leadership [95]. Goals do not only maintain motivation and desire to meet targets, but they also give the individual something tangible to aspire for and create a blueprint to stay focused and disciplined [32, 96]. Leadership involves skills, competencies and strategies that focus on collective action to achieve common goals [97, 98]. To achieve these goals, leaders should make plans so that they do not go in numerous directions, trying to figure out what to do next [34, 99]. The leaders focus their own attention because attention is the basis of the most essential of leadership skills - emotional, organizational, and strategic intelligence [100]. They also focus on ensuring the sustainable productivity of the ones in their organizations [101, 102]. By being able to remain focused at work and by careful planning, the leader gets connected to his/her sense of purpose and values.

To rise to the challenge of the marathon and complete the 26.2 mile can require speed and endurance, but most of all; it requires a huge expenditure of effort and determination [25, 95, 103]. Leadership is not different. Research shows that self-determination is essential to effective leadership based on the frequency with which attributes of self-determination are identified as elements of effective leadership [98, 104]. Leaders should have abundant passion and high intentionality. For leaders it takes steadfastness to stay determined in the face of challenges and successes ([105, 106], p. 235; [107]).

Experienced runners advise the beginners to expect the unexpected and to be prepared for it when it comes to running a marathon. Most unexpected things that happen during a marathon are like; breaking a shoelace, a heart rate monitor that will not stay on, messing up the GPS watch, chafing, wearing too little or too many clothes, cold symptoms or heat exhaustion, potty problems, blisters and black toenails, getting tripped by another runner or getting to a water station only to find out that they are out of liquid. When the unexpected occurs during a race, the runner should try not to get too upset and keep running [32, 108–110]. It is also possible that the worst happens on marathon day and the runner has to pull out, or gets injured. In such a case, he/she should try to think positively and focus on what

he/she has achieved and not on what he/she has not. Top performers look at these things as learning experiences and let it be a motivation to get themselves in shape for the next opportunity. This is the time to start questioning "If I were going to do it again, what would I learn from that? What would I do differently?" and look for areas of improvement. That fires the brain towards a newer goal rather than away from it [111]. This happens also in leadership. Even the most experienced and skillful leaders have been confounded and frustrated by the inconsistent outcomes of careful planning [112]. Leaders need to keep an open mind and adjust their plan if necessary. It is the key to react to external changes, such as competition, customer feedback and new technologies [34]. A leader should also acknowledge that there will be setbacks. It is important to keep in mind that there are lessons learned from each failure [20, 113].

Although running is considered as an individual sport [114, 115] and not a team sport, no one gets to the finish line without support. Even though the runners compete individually, they often train with a training partner or in a team environment and often in opposition to their partner or teammates [116, 117]. By drawing inspiration and energy from each other, they push each other in order to achieve greater levels of performance. Furthermore, the training regimen of a runner includes gym trainers, masseurs to keep supple, pilates instructors, nutritionists, coaches and podiatrists. On the day of the marathon, there is a large psychological and small drafting advantage to running in a group, so it is better to stay with other runners [113, 118]. Besides, the committed individuals from fellow runners to friends, volunteers and spectators cheering on the marathon runner, lift the runner's spirits and her/his chances of success by their engagement. It would have been much harder to cross the finish line without all this support [26]. Leadership is also not a solo mission; it is a team sport. Leading an organization is so complex and multi-faceted that it is dangerously misguided to believe that one person has all the superhuman qualities that some may often claim they possess. The essence of leadership is accomplishing worthy goals through the combined effort of others [24, 119–121]. Without a diverse team and broad support, the victories can be somewhat hollow [21, 122].

A key requirement for optimal marathon performance is optimal pacing. A runner needs to become a master at pacing himself/herself in order to maximize his/her potential on the marathon day [118, 123]. To avoid getting burned out he/she should not go too fast on running or should not push himself/herself too fast in the beginning or for too long [24]. Pace also matters for long-term performance in an organization. A leader should recognize that everyone in the organization is not working at exactly the same speed and while achieving results he/she should vary the pace. In order not to use his/her own individual work pace as the standard which may usually lead to unrealistic expectations and frustrated co-workers, he/she should sometimes pause the action and create some space in the intervals between major events. In this way, energy may be conserved across the organization to lead high levels of performance for the long haul [124–126].

Marathon runners are not born. They are made. They train to become marathon runners. When a runner starts training for a marathon, unless he/she regularly runs that kind of distance (26.2 miles), he/she starts off being unable to run it. As capabilities build over time; the body transforms slowly to handle more running at faster speeds. That is the way of becoming a better runner [113, 127–129]. What makes runners and leaders is their willingness to learn and push themselves. Leadership also takes practice. The effective leaders grow in their roles. Through continuous learning and practicing, they enhance their strength, stamina and effectiveness as a leader. As they practice and develop their leadership endurance, they can run a bit longer than their last time [22, 28, 34, 84, 130].

Running a marathon requires a set of principles regarding physiology, psychology, nutrition and training [131, 132]. Like marathon runners, leaders require a set of principles that guide their actions and activities. This set of principles can be referred to as leadership ethics [84]. As ethics is the heart of leadership ([133, 134], p. 14), leading without ethics is no leadership at all [135].

Many spectators will see runners hunched over throughout the marathon, but even more so near the end. The reason is the increase in the amount of lactate in their muscles, which results in cramps. Lactate builds up when a runner burns glucose at a faster rate than he takes in oxygen, for instance, during the final sprint. Towards the end of a marathon is also when the effects of tissue damage on the muscles and joints really start to be felt, too. Unfortunately this damage is unavoidable. Resilient runners can cope with adversity and complete the marathon because they have the psychological ability to cope with both physical and mental fatigue. As the mind has great influence over the body, if the mind does not give up, the body will follow no matter how tired. Once the runner hits her/his stride, those thoughts will go away and he/she will experience a "runner's high" ([21, 136, 137], p. 23; [138, 139]). Like marathon running, leadership will also empty one's tank. At some point, the leaders' natural energy which keeps them running, influencing, stable and encouraged diminishes. As a result they need to make a lot of effort with all their resources and they burn out. In order to be able to respond to challenges and finally not burn out, a leader should keep in mind that they have unused reserves and push themselves, often one mile at a time. Otherwise, they will not realize or experience the depths of those reserves [28, 33, 140, 141].

A marathon is a massive physical challenge for the body. Recovery and self-renewal are absolutely essential and as important as activity [20, 142, 143]. Thus, following the marathon training cycle, a runner needs to spend a fair amount of time not running and instead resting, recovering and recuperating, both mentally and physically. Furthermore he/she should prevent injury and maintain hard-earned fitness by slowly and gradually building back up. Muscles need time off to heal and strengthen themselves. More rest and recovery is better than less, and a recurring theme is to listen to the body and back off until it says it is ready to go. This is the time to celebrate the past success and plan for future ones. Although similarly, leaders cannot attempt to be active all the time, recovery and renewal are often ignored in business. The research shows that working long hours on a continuous basis reduces overall effectiveness [144–146]. As the leaders cannot deal effectively with challenges and cannot manage stressful situations without a baseline level of emotional well-being, they need to give themselves time to relax and recharge [130, 141, 147, 148].

The glory of the most recent run remains with the runner only for a short time. Then comes the time to do it once again. The finish line of a marathon is the start of a new one. After the recovery is over, it is time to start the next season or cycle to set new goals and build on the strengths and weaknesses of past training. As goals are made to be achieved, either for a runner or a leader, it is suggested to decide on a greater and longer term goal. For a marathon runner, this may be to run another marathon or do one in a new and exciting location. For the leader, this may be a new project or a greater organizational success. New goals are set and the cycle of "challenge and accomplish" is repeated [149].

This review reveals that there is no one trait that will guarantee the runner a marathon success, but several rules of thumb that come together to give him/her the best chance. Likewise, many studies were conducted in the area of leadership trait theories to discover a list of physical and psychological traits or qualities that account for leadership effectiveness. However, none of them has come up with a universal list of traits that all successful leaders possess, or traits that will

guarantee leadership success. Although there is no list of traits that guarantees leadership success, traits that are related to leadership success have been identified ([150, 151], p. 16; [152, 153]).

3. Conclusion

This research deals with the leadership development concept from the perspective of constructivist theory from a viewpoint of learning transfer and reveals that the participants of a marathon which is regarded as one of the greatest feats of human endurance [82] and the ultimate human challenge ([83], p. 348) can develop their leadership skills which can directly be applied to today's organizations.

Marathon running has become a popular sport globally in recent years. This can be partially reflected by the rapid growing number of marathon participants all over the world [154]. Although marathon running is one of the most demanding sports in the world, highly successful people enjoy this sport. While they have character traits such as focus and persistence, they can achieve success both in a marathon and in the business world [155]. Several studies revealed that a character trait of the millennial generation is also a desire to succeed [156, 157] and being a runner is part of their identity [158]. Thus, it is no wonder that they have been dubbed "the running generation" [159].

Sport, as a sphere of human life which is dominated by the continuous competition, naturally creates and shapes leaders [160]. Business leaders are keen to understand the athletes' passion for excellence and translate this formula for success into the corporate world [121]. While leadership is a lifelong marathon that one must endeavor to run with distinction so that he/she may get his/her due reward [161], the leaders know that they have a long distance to run and it is not speed but other traits like stamina and endurance that will carry them through [113].

In today's rapid-paced organizations, dynamic leaders are needed more than ever. The qualities that one has to replicate to thrive as a leader and to run a marathon are the same and marathon running has a structure similar to today's business environment with its compelling and dynamic conditions. Today the companies are looking for ways to offer their millennial leaders enough opportunities to develop and grow in ways that fit their preferences and styles. This study provides guidance on how marathons constitute more experiential while less didactic and thus unique learning environments for the millennial leaders to develop new perceptions of what they are trying to accomplish, what are the obstacles that stand in their way, and what they can do to overcome them and thus observe the challenges they will face. Today organizations seek to extend training beyond the basics. The present study wants to encourage them to break the traditional mold in their leadership development processes to open up to new and innovative ideas on these programs by the development of a methodology of marathon running to be translated into a mindset that will improve leadership performance.

Today leaders have to go through various learning processes which have both cognitive and behavioral complexity [162]. Previous research has emphasized the value of leadership development, offered insights on leadership preparation and revealed that leadership encompasses a learned set of knowledge, skills and attitudes [163, 164]. Leadership training and development programs which include a process of learning for problem solving, decision making and strategy formulation, have become a popular technique [165, 166]. As Covey [167] claims: "No person can persuade another to change. Each of us guards a gate that can only be opened from the inside." To ensure a positive learning transfer, a leadership development program must create the appropriate learning environment by providing learning

experiences that are applied beyond the specific conditions of initial learning and make learners learn by observation, interpretation, analysis and questioning.

Running a marathon helps to build the mental skills and attitude necessary for traversing the challenges of the business. It does not only have profound benefits for mental health [168] but it also helps the individuals to develop mental toughness [169] which is a skill that the magnitude of the success of a leader depends on [170]. Furthermore, it offers a dynamic, experiential course for leadership development and opportunities to develop one's personal leadership style to inspire his/her team, motivate the staff and transform the organization. As learning environments with strong applicability to future experiences have greater potential for a more positive transfer of learning ([171], p. 230) marathons have a positive effect on the leadership skills of the participants and contributes to leadership development. Runners also claim that marathons provide vivid leadership development lessons [23, 33]. The findings of the present study suggest the Millennial professionals, the next generation of leaders who were raised by the concept of "team dynamics" and "everyone's a winner" in the school classroom [172], to take on new athletic challenges and run a marathon in order to make it a part of their leadership development. Although running a marathon is not on everyone's bucket list, it is a fact that the ones in leadership roles are (metaphorically) training for marathons every day they turn up for work.

The present paper presents a contemporary approach to leadership development and suggests the organizations to design leadership programs that will benefit from the learning transfer that identifies the common factors between marathon running and leadership. Marathon running may be a brilliant idea for the leaders to undertake leadership exercises in order to stretch their leadership skills. When coupled with training classes for developing leadership competencies and specific development goals, such an assignment may constitute a wonderful platform for leadership development and a rich growth opportunity that yields many benefits to the leader as a learner. Although scholars claim that it is difficult to predict whether transfer of learning will be positive or negative in particular cases because of incomplete knowledge of what was learned originally and how the transfer task is represented ([173], p. 4), the findings of the present study support the idea that the implementing of descriptive processes of marathon running programs in leadership development programs possesses relevance to leadership development issues with elements of valuable context. The results of this study, therefore, may help break new ground in comparing the effectiveness of traditional approach versus constructivist approach in leadership development programs.

The particular frame presented in the present study supports the experiences of several others (e.g. [20–34]) that marathon running and leadership development share experiential commons. Regarding the findings of the present study, it is suggested to the human resource executives who will decide to organize such leadership development programs, to choose running programs which have levels of difficulty that suits the participants' athletic levels and to encourage the individuals to participate these programs, even a marathon. As training for a marathon, takes planning, discipline and serious preparation, the challenge will be incredible and deliver several lessons for a leader. The leadership development programs which will combine traditional corporate classroom lessons with marathon training sessions will make the corporate leaders develop their leadership skills with their constructivist sessions. This approach also helps to eliminate the transferability issues that are typically present in leadership development programs in the corporate world and in academic settings.

There has been a considerable increase in the number of participants running marathons over the past several years [174]. Many leaders believe that a motivation

to keep running is that it leads to business success by reducing stress, creating a balance in their lives and fostering a mental toughness that can bring rewards in the boardroom [175]. They are also running marathons because they are very success-oriented people and the marathons make them experience an even greater sense of achievement [176]. Previous research revealed that there is a positive relationship between leader fitness and firm value [177] and participation in sport influences leadership skills, style and career development and constitutes a powerful motivator for executives [178]. Previous research also revealed that despite the negative stigma associated with burnout resulting from marathon training, 85.7 percent of marathon runners believe that training did not negatively impact their ability to do their job. As the dedication and commitment involved in training can actually equip participants with a whole range of transferable skills that they can apply in the workplace, it can have a positive impact on overall career success. This makes marathon runners possibly even better employees [93]. These findings are consistent with the findings of the present study which reveal that marathon runners become better leaders. Despite the pain of it, running a marathon and testing the limits of the body and mind helps the leaders build the mental skills and attitude necessary for beating leadership challenges.

Written in 1908, the Olympic Creed states "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well." [179]. True leaders understand that leadership development is a journey that never ends. And they keep in mind that success is not about finishing on top or making the most money. They are in a learning journey of constant growth, evolving and developing creative thinking capabilities and competencies. As the one who runs a marathon, runs against the distance, not against the other runners, it is more important for the leaders to learn from the journey and reach their potential [33, 180–182].

4. Practical implications

Previous research suggests that leader development programmes should be realistic and challenging while providing an opportunity for growth in knowledge and skills through self-reflections and external assessments [104, 183]. Leadership development programmes which are poorly matched to participants' expectations can be harmful and create negative experiences ([184], p. 435). The researchers should suggest a new paradigm of leadership that will operate for the new generation leaders of the 21st century, not the old paradigm of leadership that has dominated the literature for years. Taken together, the findings of this study have significant implications for the understanding of how marathon running promotes leadership development.

5. Limitations and further research

Regarding the findings of the present study, the corporate marathon running programs are expected to demonstrate the ability to produce beneficial outcomes in critical areas of leadership development. However, some scholars and human resources executives may question whether these programs truly benefit leaders and their respective organizations. While the findings of the present study may speak favorably for these programs, how these changes are affected by differing cultures and organizations remains unclear. The future research should focus on the lack of

clarity around these variables as well as the effectiveness of certain facilitation practices in achieving desired leadership development objectives for the organizations.

As the primary purpose of the present study is to offer new insights into leadership development of millennial leaders, the researcher hopes that the findings could help the design of these programs to become more effective in leaders of the new generation leaders.

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