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Leadership, network facilitation and regional development: critical reflection as a tool for insight???

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Abstract

In his keynote address at the ANZRSAI Conference 2005, Professor Blakely challenged regional scientists to use their "ideal position to forge these [separate disciplines informing regional science] into a disciplinary understanding that operates across disciplines". In doing so the forces at work in the myths, magic and mix of regional innovation are necessarily viewed as interdependent components. The component to be focussed upon here is leadership, especially where it assists in developing networks and "knowdes" in the web of the development of the knowledge economy. Such a critical perspective encourages a consideration of the work of practitioners in regional development from the perspective of the theory/practice interface and an examination of the intersection of leaders and leadership with the regional community process. There seem to be parallels in the way leaders interact with their communities and, in the case of regional development (and community engagement), no clear understanding of how inspirational activities and events occur though there are many exhortations to create clever networks and groups. How do the players come together? What is the rich detail and how does it fit with theory? Using notions of reflective practice developed by and from the work of Schon, this paper explores the leadership process in development of an event in a region. The event is significant for bringing together players in a way not achieved before. The paper is a critical reflection considering the event from the perspective of a player in the process, the roles played, and development of plans. In doing so the paper accesses grainy detail that provides insight while at the same time using available data to augment the lens. This is not a study of a concrete reality, nor simply an interpretation of the symbolic reality, but a critical reflection upon an event, its creation and success. The event under scrutiny is not a new one in the practice of regional development: a business expo for Shoalhaven region on the southern coast of New South Wales, Australia. For this event, local initiative has: harnessed the business expo with a careers expo; rolled in a joint campus of TAFE and University; and, gathered input from a wider range of players in the regional net of organisations than has been seen before in Shoalhaven. Naming the event 'Shoalhaven on Show' is a significant positioning in regard to regional capability building and branding.

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In his keynote address at the ANZRSAI Conference 2005, Professor Blakely challenged regional scientists to use their "ideal position to forge these [separate disciplines informing regional science] into a disciplinary understanding that operates across disciplines". In doing so the forces at work in the myths, magic and mix of regional innovation are necessarily viewed as interdependent components. The component to be focussed upon here is leadership, especially where it assists in developing networks and "knowdes" in the web of the development of the knowledge economy.

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Using notions of reflective practice developed by and from the work of Schon, this paper explores the leadership process in development of an event in a region. The event is significant for bringing together players in a way not achieved before. The paper is a critical reflection considering the event from the perspective of a player in the process, the roles played, and development of plans. In doing so the paper accesses grainy detail that provides insight while at the same time using available data to augment the lens. This is not a study of a concrete reality, nor simply an interpretation of the symbolic reality, but a critical reflection upon an event, its creation and success.

The event under scrutiny is not a new one in the practice of regional development: a business expo for Shoalhaven region on the southern coast of New South Wales, Australia. For this event, local initiative has: harnessed the business expo with a careers expo; rolled in a joint campus of TAFE and University; and, gathered input from a wider range of players in the regional net of organisations than has been seen before in Shoalhaven. Naming the event 'Shoalhaven on Show' is a significant positioning in regard to regional capability building and branding.

Inspiration

Double, double toil and trouble;
   Fire burn, and caldron bubble.
                         Shakespeare: Macbeth

The conference title foregrounds the myths, magic and mix of regional innovation and this paper focuses on the questions surrounding leadership development in the process of regional innovation. In quoting the witches from Macbeth, I highlight awareness of the intangible; that which is difficult to identify. Regional experience is being impacted by the knowledge economy in ways which are still being identified and are the subject of a range of interpretations. What is clear is that "creativity … is now the main internal driver for regional viability in a knowledge based global economy" (Garlick & Pryor 2002). It is not at all clear how we 'get creative'. What I wanted to achieve in my presentation at the 2005 conference was an interrogation of practice: a reflective process which was grounded in an experience of leadership in regional development. I wanted the material presented posed as part of this reflection or interrogation so that process was foregrounded with a view to developing ways of identifying the elements.

At the 2004 ANZRSAI conference Laurie Stevenson and I introduced the importance of mental models, of mindset and the way these inform the process of regional development. (Collins and Stevenson 2004) During the presentation we displayed an Escher drawing as I did again this year to create awareness of perception. Like all Escher drawings, the one presented plays with the perceptual frame of the viewer and the expectations of what is likely to occur. (http://www.mmcescher.com) In regional development, one's frame of reference effects the range of options imagined for development. Inspiring the community and/or significant players in the community is part of the process of changing the regional mindset and developing people's aspirations. The 2004 focus for Collins and Stevenson was on the importance of the way the community and university are interlinked, engaged – we use the words "wired into the community" - to suggest the networks and flows that are evidence of imagination. We suggested that where universities are wired into the community, the university has potential to act effectively as a "knowde" in the knowledge hub, rather than just being another node amongst institutions networking.

With the development of the knowledge economy, Collins and Stevenson's contention was that sharing of imagination is a critical element in regional development. Knowdes in a web of connections inter- and intra-regionally in the process of development were how Collins & Stevenson identified the creation of effective connections. This parallels Kanter's (1995) depiction of the infrastructure for collaboration necessary to meet the challenges of the knowledge economy. Similarly, Blakely (2004) identified networks and the density of them, as one of the important resources for regional development in his keynote address for the 2004 ANZRSAI conference. Blakely claims regional advantage is characterised where leadership replaces leader for articulating the future of these places capturing collective benefits. He observes that Porter (2001) 'describes this collective capacity

as "strategic resources of political and social organisations"' and notes the paucity of studies of the networks and the way they operate.

According to the OECD (2004) networks should generate dialogue between organisations and other players. Leaders and regional leadership play a significant part in creating such networks. The networking process provides a means of exchanging information, discussing issues of common interest and of creating a vision regarding development. Networks such as these rely on what the OECD refers to as 'animateurs who generate dialogue between the various organisations' (OECD 2004: 18). These animateurs are inspirational leaders whose paradigms or mindset mean they are capable of thinking "outside the square". But from where do these leaders come? How do we develop new leaders? Once we have these them how do they develop their leadership skills?

Challenges

Is it worth using some of the notions of leadership from various disciplines to provide a lens for consideration? Leadership is discussed in extensively in management and organisational theory and some of the inspiration for this paper comes from Schon's work in the 80s to develop reflective practitioners in classrooms and other venues of professional development. It is interesting to note that organisational theory has been applied to regional and community development, with a view to providing ways to understand how a region or community works and that this kind of modelling is questioned.

Notwithstanding this, organisational theory provides some notions of leadership and therefore perhaps offers some stepping stones to identifying effective leadership process for regional development. If we want the myths, magic and mix to foster innovation, then we need to understand that because people are like icebergs, only showing part of the complex whole of their individual make-up, effective leaders …
· Act to build trust
· Work with others to solve problems
· Act as change agents
· Are need satisfiers accepting of and able to work with the different feelings, values and needs of others
· Establish direction, align people and create conditions in which others will be inspired to act collaboratively to achieve agreed goals (mostly Kotter 1990)

The problem with these ideas of leadership is that the characteristics listed above provide insight about leadership from observation. However, they do not necessarily assist us in developing leadership skills to act in these ways. They also clearly fail to provide means of using them to create the networks to assist regions develop in the knowledge economy. They are descriptive and analytic observations about what we should do and how we should do it. But
· The doing process tends to escape.

What is it that a leader, who is inspiring a network, is doing to build trust or work with others to solve problems or any other of a myriad of activities in inspiring a network.

To understand leadership in the context of "doing", the notion of distributed leadership (Gronn 1999) might add our understanding. This orients us to the context of leadership and the relationship that develops between leaders and group. It implies the negotiation of the role of leader that is a constant in the way leaders work. Leaders are not only animateurs but they have conferred authority that allows them to lead at a given moment. There is transaction at the heart of the leadership process.

> Leadership … is most advantageously understood as a
> collectively realised, interdependent activity enacted in issue-
> and problem- saturated environments characterised by varying
> degrees of information richness or parsimony.
> Rather than being the exclusive domain of those accorded formal
> positions of responsibility within an organisation, leadership is,
> in fact, realised … by a variety of different individuals and/or
> groups
> The issues and environment … change the ways in which
> leadership is expressed, and thus, the locations of this expression
> change. (Gronn 1999)

We need to understand the parts that make up the experience of leadership. To understand the changes taking place in regions, there is a need to collect and access data and to provide descriptive analysis identifying the "issues and environment". But there is also a need to understand the grainy "experience, trial and error, intuition and muddling through" that manifests in practice (cf Schon 1983). Gron's use of the word "realised" suggests the need for this kind of understanding. We need to understand the parts that make up the experience of leadership. A rich analysis provides a way of knowing, of seeing, and of understanding the active process in order that leaders reflect on their actions and on the technical/data specific material. They come to understand how the leadership is realised.

As well, they also need to reflect on their reflection in action (cf Schon 1983)
- the thinking on your feet,
- the learning by doing,
- that following the moment that characterises the experience of those in the front line of regional development.

These reflective processes need to be practised and developed especially in creation of networks. In other words, the skills of realising leadership need to be teased out and the realisation process, the "doing", explored for improvement in the next realisation. In accepting Gronn's notion of distributed leadership, I also propose that we accept the awareness of the interaction between individual and group. The transaction between to the two is part of the process which I begin to explore in Diagram 1 below. Reflection is carried out by individuals and by the group. There is also interaction in the reflective process between the individuals and the group in collegial or group discussion. Thus, the reflection involves the intersection of the individuals and the group in a series of questions about what is happening and about what outcomes might be sought. The actual discussion of the group revolves around the matters in hand while the reflective process moves in and out of focus. It is awareness of

reflection on the process of leadership that we need those in leadership positions, whatever their role in the group, to practice.

Diagram 1

Reflecting	
• Individual • Group	By whom? · About what? · To achieve?
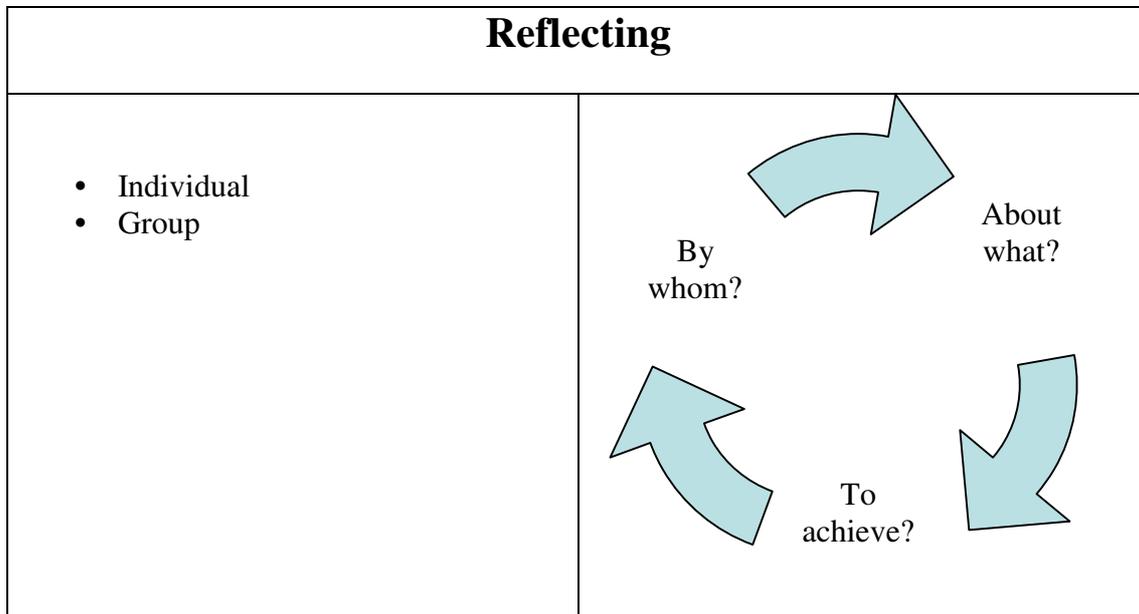
Leadership and strategy - the "what should we be doing stuff"

In the 2004 ANZRSAI Conference Craig Mathieson (2004) in a reflective tone on his career as an economic development practitioner said "Economic development is a deliberate intervention – a change process" and quoted David Kolzow (1992) on Strategic Planning for Economic Development which "requires planning, creates conflict and involves effort". Mathieson noted Prentiss' observation that some economic development organisations have just enough money to do nothing (Karen Prentiss 1990 quoted in Mathieson 2004). Mathieson's conclusion is that

·   The solutions are about alliances, partnerships and relationships that have capacity to share implementation and to share success.

To achieve leadership in these alliances, partnerships and relationships, reflections will need to be about the deeds to plan and intervene and will also focus on resolutions to the conflict that arises. Players who have a stake in the outcome of the the processes are likely to be those who need to be taking a role in the reflective process and part of their reflection will be to achieve agreement about the vision for the region. The next part of this paper explores the experience of a player in a regional process from a reflective perspective trying to tease out where and how leadership worked to achieve alliances, partnerships and relationships. It explores how intervention on the part of different group members worked to share implementation and success or led to failure to achieve, or in some cases, agree upon outcomes is also explored to taste the dynamic process.

"Muddling through"

What follows is not a study of a concrete reality, nor simply an interpretation of the symbolic reality, but a critical reflection upon an event, its creation and success. This is critical reflection considering the event from the perspective of a player in the process, the roles played, and development of plans.

The event and actions surrounding it under scrutiny are not new ones in the practice of regional development. Shoalhaven on Show is a business expo in and for Shoalhaven region on the southern coast of New South Wales, Australia. For this event, local initiative has: harnessed the business expo with a careers expo; rolled in a joint campus of TAFE and University; and, gathered input from a wider range of players in the regional net of organisations than has been seen before in Shoalhaven. Naming the event 'Shoalhaven on Show' is a significant positioning in regard to regional capability building and branding. Some of the potential of the event was not realised and this provides an interesting perspective from which to consider what was achieved and the potential outcomes beyond the expo.

Shoalhaven on Show roots were in a Business to Business Expo branded and run by a local accounting firm in 2002 and 2003. (Historical information available on http://www.shoalhavenonshow.com.au). As a marketing activity of one firm, the breadth of exhibitors was inhibited. In my role as Head of the university campus, which was the historic venue for these events, I attempted to influence others to see that the event needed a broader base. My background is education, management, people and empowerment, and, local economic development. The current thrust of universities to engage with their communities meant that my working role intersected with my interests. Networking is a core part of my role for the Campus in the Shoalhaven. Hosting events which mean that the Shoalhaven develops creatively is an important part of the campus activities, not least because they foreground post school education to a community with lower than the national average transfer to post school education. (Collins and Stevenson 2004)

Shoalhaven is a region in change: there are dying industries and developing ones; there is a nascent café society and associated knowledge workers. Amongst those influencing the patterns of development are the continuum from change resisters to change embracers. An event like Shoalhaven on Show can be considered in at least two ways: as a symbol of how the region is travelling at this moment and as part of the change process – a next step or a link in the process.

The significance of Shoalhaven on Show is suggested by the outline in the following table of comments and observations. It was the first time that so many players in local network had collaborated.

·	Things said to me like: I wouldn't be here if x was running it.
·	Or: We couldn't get z to talk to us about this last time

·	Oppositional sectors operating in concert
·	Email network truly regional – distributed to other local networks, both electronic and other in a flow on process
·	Letters and emails of congratulations including ones demonstrating understanding of the vision and the potential in the process
·	Competitors working together to create stalls – taking it the next step beyond the B2B experience eg. Conveyancers shared a stall so that these micro businesses could afford to be there
·	90% plan to return next year

And in these comments and the intended return lie the seeds of further development, whether it happens through another Shoalhaven on Show or some other networking process which was augmented through the dynamics of this event. The Shoalhaven on Show was effective as a product according to the surveys and also as a part of a process of development.

Some significant moments in the myth -, magic- and mix- making of the process

Fostering agreement to auspice the event: listening and nudging

The decision to create Shoalhaven on Show was facilitated through a series of discussions with Executive Members of the local Chamber of Commerce. There was fear that the event was beyond the capability of the Chamber, especially in regard to the Chamber leaders and their ability to find time to coordinate the event. My role became, for a short time, the spur to commit. In part this was facilitated by Campus marketing dollars I could allocate to support coordination, but as important was providing an ear for other leaders to articulate their concerns and finding ways in a group process to address these. With dollars in place, much of this was developing a vision of what a regional business expo would be about. It was important to listen attentively and to allow free discussion in order to avoid being dominant but at the same time balancing this with questions or comments that fostered growth of the idea. Recognising when to push and when to listen involved sensitivity to players.

Linking a related initiative to build the magic: building vision

As well there were a committee of careers advisers, teachers, employment support consultants and other community workers seeking to facilitate a careers expo. The link between these two groups was my role as Head of Campus in my networking hat. There had been no collaboratively created careers expo with a Shoalhaven focus for some time, albeit there had been significant single school events. Due in part to a government funding possibility, there were moves by the Chamber to join these events. Again, what became most important was the development of a regional vision for the event as a regional esteem building and networking event (which makes the outcomes less easy to measure for individual businesses). Interestingly, the careers advisers became and remain keen to continue the joint event while the Chamber

became distracted from this vision due to other elements of process and their own perspectives on what they should achieve in an effective expo.

Engaging the range of networks: finding neutral ground for a springboard to action

In Shoalhaven there are at least 7 different business organisations, 2 of whom see themselves as peak organisations. In addition, there are sector based organisations, a range of informal sector and issue based networks of import for regional development and Council based staff whose units are not necessarily aligned in operation. In my role, as relative newcomer and from the University and therefore independent, I was able to foster and chair a meeting on the neutral territory of the Campus which led to a group vision of the possibilities, but even more pragmatically was a venue where people from different backgrounds declared commitment and willingness to share their networks. The neutral territory allowed the needs and desires of others to be expressed and also led to multiplication of channels of communication across the networks in the region. This e/affects the final product both in the sense of the event but also what the event creates for possible future activities/events/networks. (When does the final product occur??)

Here, moving in and out of the role of chair was important in setting collaborative tone. For one Chamber player, this broad network was sufficiently strong, that she became fearful that I was taking over control of the event. To arrest this perception, it was necessary to "back pedal" for a moment while her sense of control was re-established. In some ways, she was simply another lead player, in a dynamic about a series of lead players. Managing the perceptions and comforts of others is developed through reflection in action and on action. My management of this situation was a reflection in action process where I saw a problem and changed behaviour to address another's needs and role. It is worth noting that the intersection here between the notions of leadership and management. (which needs further development in such a set of considerations).

Moving between the roles of instigator and cooperator: Trying to stay in the position of trusted individual - ethics, personal traits, fair play: reflective process the key

For someone balancing the driving of powerful groups and players, there is a constant need to be aware of who plays what role while also figuring out how and when to pull who together. The dynamics and interplay that confer authority need to be read carefully. This is particularly so where there are players with unresolved issues. The process of reflection can provide the insight to manage the situation such that the players can avoid each other or meet on agreed ground without having to address the conflicts immediately, which might lead to a breakdown in the process of event creation. This is particularly so where reflection in action is used to develop ideas "on the run". Here, how to create the agreed grounds for meeting so that the tasks can be carried on. And it is in this kind of situation where the role of leaders as "need satisfiers" and the reflection in action work together through "the thinking on your feet, the learning by doing, that following the moment that characterises the experience of those in the front line of regional development".

There is also the question here of who plays what role? My experience in the Shoalhaven on Show situation was very much as the influencer on the outside as

nominally the leader was President of the Chamber of Commerce. And there was another covert leader in the person of the champion of the Business to Business Expos in previous years. There are moments when reflection suggests that the best movement is no movement and others when it is clear that decisive actions are needed. Providing practice in reflection in action and then reflection after the process to address the rights and wrongs can lead to challenging perceptions of how things should be done leading to changes in mindset and development.

Conclusions

Reflection needs to be ongoing throughout process and needs to be in touch
                        with research,
                        with frames of reference,
                        with hard data being generated
but perhaps most importantly if networks are being created,
                        with the players in the nascent network.
"Reflection in action tends to surface not only the assumptions and techniques but the values and purposes embedded in organizational knowledge". (Schon 1983) Thus for Shoalhaven on Show came a quote from a leading player to this writer:
"You know I guess my entrepreneurial spin isn't going to work here. Somehow we have to act cooperatively to make this happen. It's pretty different to how I work with my business. I don't share much. I make decisions and get on with it. Here I need to cooperate not compete. It's a different spin."

What's in it for?

Practitioners working in the field
- a way of seeing and questioning that provides scope for involvement and distance and enhances the opportunities for a meeting between doing and theory

Researchers and regional scientists
- to be working with, for, about, through and on the theory where it meets the practice creating the opportunity for universities to be wired into the "knowdes" in the knowledge economy
- real connection, community engagement and immediate feedback on our critical practice

Networks
- theoreticians and practitioners reflecting together working creatively and with understanding of leadership and the realisation of cooperatively developed vision.

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