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Leadership competencies: a reference point for development and evaluation

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to establish a transparent, integrated approach to leadership competency development and succession management to respond to drivers associated with an ageing workforce, leadership drain and the enticement of people into leadership roles. Design/methodology/approach – A consultant was engaged to facilitate a review of the UOW Library's leadership situation. Key to this process and subsequent activities was the use of the Lominger Leadership competencies; measurable characteristics related to success in the workplace to establish the desired leadership profile. Career interviews, professional coaching and targeted assignments were integral to the development of needed competencies. Findings – The paper finds that feedback from peers, managers and staff was a significant component of the evaluation strategy. Formal assessment took place through the use of the Lominger's VOICESw 360-degree feedback instrument, an institutional employee climate survey and recertification against the Investors in People standard. Results showed improved self-confidence in leaders, a greater preparedness to address underperformance, and that career and developmental plans were more considered and constructive in their design. Significant improvement in leadership performance was noted in a later employee climate survey. Practical implications – A commitment by the executive or senior leadership team is critical to this type of developmental program. Considerable energy and time is required from all parties involved, e.g. scheduling time for workshops, coaching sessions, subsequent actions and review; challenging in an environment of ever-increasing priorities. Challenging also is the management of perceptions and expectations of staff. There was some disaffection from staff who were not included in the first round of coaching. Subsequently, opportunities to support both external and internal coaching are being investigated. Originality/value – A commitment to new methods to support and evaluate leadership development initiatives resulted in changed perceptions of leadership aspiration, aptitude and ability. The identification of required competencies provided improved goal clarity, insight on how to become skilled in a given competency, and a reference point for evaluation. Importantly the performance of leaders has improved. There is qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate both a commitment to leadership development and the application of desired behaviours associated with the competencies. The capacity to grow and promote from within has also improved; evidence that the succession management initiative is being achieved.

Keywords
point, development, evaluation, leadership, reference, competencies

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Leadership competencies: a reference point for development and evaluation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to establish a transparent, integrated approach to leadership competency development and succession management to respond to drivers associated with an ageing workforce, leadership drain and the enticement of people into leadership roles.

Design/methodology/approach – A consultant was engaged to facilitate a review of the UOW Library's leadership situation. Key to this process and subsequent activities was the use of the Lominger Leadership competencies; measurable characteristics related to success in the workplace to establish the desired leadership profile. Career interviews, professional coaching and targeted assignments were integral to the development of needed competencies.

Findings – The paper finds that feedback from peers, managers and staff was a significant component of the evaluation strategy. Formal assessment took place through the use of the Lominger's VOICES® 360-degree feedback instrument, an institutional employee climate survey and recertification against the Investors in People standard. Results showed improved self-confidence in leaders, a greater preparedness to address underperformance, and that career and developmental plans were more considered and constructive in their design. Significant improvement in leadership performance was noted in a later employee climate survey.

Practical implications – A commitment by the executive or senior leadership team is critical to this type of developmental program. Considerable energy and time is required from all parties involved, e.g. scheduling time for workshops, coaching sessions, subsequent actions and review; challenging in an environment of ever-increasing priorities. Challenging also is the management of perceptions and expectations of staff. There was some disaffection from staff who were not included in the first round of coaching. Subsequently, opportunities to support both external and internal coaching are being investigated.

Originality/value – A commitment to new methods to support and evaluate leadership development initiatives resulted in changed perceptions of leadership aspiration, aptitude and ability. The identification of required competencies provided improved goal clarity, insight on how to become skilled in a given competency, and a reference point for evaluation. Importantly the performance of leaders has improved. There is qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate both a commitment to leadership development and the application of desired behaviours associated with the competencies. The capacity to grow and promote from within has also improved; evidence that the succession management initiative is being achieved.

Introduction

To improve its capacity to respond to the issues associated with an ageing workforce within the library and information sector and subsequent leadership drain, the imperative for the University of Wollongong Library (UWL) was to create a transparent, integrated approach to succession management and leadership development through the clear articulation of opportunities and expectations for staff wishing to progress to different roles as well as improvement opportunities for those currently content in their existing role. Underpinning these aims was a need to:

- clarify of our intent and strategies for succession planning;
- establish a process for staff with leadership interest or potential to be independently assessed and provided with feedback;
- implement a process to develop career strategies and opportunities for those with aptitude, capability and commitment;
- consider different approaches to leadership development training and opportunities for existing team leaders;
- assess availability of external and internal coaching and mentoring for targeted staff; and
- determine indicators of success, i.e. what could be considered evidence of effective implementation of a leadership development framework.

Approach

Attracting leaders, developing leaders and succession management are issues consistently at front of mind for many executives, including those responsible for libraries (Intagliata *et al.*, 2000). The University of Wollongong Library (UWL) is no exception. This case study outlines the approach undertaken by UWL to better understand the competencies required to be an effective leader and describes the evaluation and assessment activities used to test the success and impact of efforts.

The Library has a long history of using business excellence frameworks and standards, e.g. Australian Business Excellence Framework, Investors in People (IIP) (McGregor, 2004; and Jantti, 2007) to guide staff development within the context of an organisation that values and supports: equitable access to development opportunities, empowerment, capacity for change, initiative and leadership.

We have used these guiding principles to create at their time, innovative approaches to supporting leadership development. UWL is considered an early mover in the development of values and attributes to describe desired workplace behaviours, the use of career plans and support for targeted training and development. These principles of good practice coupled with knowledge of gaps in the recruitment market were the catalyst for the creation of a successful professional cadetship program; designed to grow leaders from within (Wright and Lombardi, 2006). Six new professionals have completed or are progressing through the three year program, and all graduating cadets to date have secured positions within the organisation.

Succession management has been a focus for several iterations of the business plan. Staff are actively encouraged and supported to participate in leadership programs, undertake secondments and other professional development activities. In spite of these efforts, filling leadership vacancies, at both middle and senior levels has lately proved difficult. Like many academic libraries, we are facing the issue of an ageing workforce (Williamson, 2009; and Whitmell, 2006) and the subsequent loss of knowledge, skills and experience. Due to the limited uptake by internal staff for senior level positions, it was perceived that there lacked appetite and ability to engage with leadership; and despite aforementioned efforts, a climate of leadership inertia was emerging.

This situation identified the need for a much needed recalibration of existing approaches to leadership development and succession management. It was imperative that new approaches be considered on how UWL could support and develop its existing team leaders and managers. It was apparent that external expertise was required and a consultant was secured. In 2009, in collaboration with the consultant, a new leadership strategy was introduced.

To guide the leadership development and evaluation strategy, clarity was needed on what a successful leader looked like within the context, purpose and philosophy of our organisation (Intagliata *et al.*, 2000). The Lominger Leadership Architect®, a compilation of 67 competencies drawn from research of the characteristics possessed and demonstrated by successful leaders (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2009) became the foundation of establishing success profiles for UWL leaders.

Through workshops led by the consultant, the Library Executive Committee (LEC), made up of the University Librarian and Associate Librarians and the Coordinators Action Team (CAT – made up of team leaders and managers), the 67 competencies were assessed in light of existing goals and future challenges (Charan, 2005) and were then shortlisted to nine to establish a success profile for each of the two leadership groups.

The success profiles for each group differed considerably as depicted in Table I. This is to be expected, as "the lines of sight are, in fact, different and the competency architecture needs to reflect this" (Intagliata *et al.*, p. 21). A validation exercise conducted by the two leadership teams affirmed that the competency profiles were both desired and expected for success.

A key point to note is that the competencies do not reflect technical skills, knowledge or expertise of a library professional as such, rather the competencies describe the "measurable characteristics of a person that are related to success at work" (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2009, p. i).

The success profiles have provided useful information to guide development. Notably, competencies are described, providing clarity of expectations (some examples will be provided in this paper). Of particular interest was the indication of developmental difficulty of each competency and the articulation of unskilled, skilled and over-used skill behaviours in the execution of a given competency. This information is useful to help understand how to support incremental development of competencies, the value to be gained by the leader in strengthening a particular competency and importantly, to help identify milestones to reflect growth.

The descriptions for skilled, unskilled and over-used skills provide a necessary reference point for feedback, action and recognition. Coupled with the descriptions are potential remedies to address competency development; offering a roadmap to guide improvement (Lombardo and Eichinger, 2009) (see Table II).

The next step was the use of career interviews between the consultant and middle managers. This provided the opportunity to discuss career goals, level of ambition and what were considered the obstacles, stallers or impediments to their goals. The use of a consultant to facilitate these one-on-one discussions provided the necessary objectivity and lack of bias, thus eliciting candid responses; more than could have been achieved if led by a member of the UWL staff.

Through this process, a key organisational myth was overturned. It was revealed that there was considerable appetite and potential for leadership. Importantly, new insights emerged to reveal the reasons for inertia.

For many who participated in the interviews, the "gap" in skill and competency between middle and senior level leadership was too wide to bridge; that they lacked the knowledge and tools to start closing the gap. For some, the incentives were not sufficiently attractive and clashed with the personal value placed on work/life balance. All they could see was that higher levels of leadership just meant more work, more hours and a loss of conditions that fostered work/life balance, such as flexible hours of work. We as the Library Executive were not making the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits of senior level leadership visible or attractive.

A significant milestone in evaluating current and potential leaders against the competencies was a self and peer assessment exercise. A predetermined rating scale was used by the Executive team to evaluate an individual's performance against the competencies in both leadership success profiles and the individual also completed an assessment against the competency profiles. The purpose of this exercise was to: test perception and alignment and to create discussion points to focus on unpacking the ratings assigned, and reconciling "gaps" in alignment, and consideration as to whether an individual was as competent as they thought.

These exercises provided the necessary insight to understand the leadership potential of UWL. Staff clearly valued the candid discussions that had taken place; it was revealing and empowering to be asked, "where do I see myself in the future and how might I get there?". The next phase was to enable action; significantly, action that was driven and owned by the individual.

Professional career coaching, colloquially known in UWL as conversations for action commenced with the aim of reaching agreement on personal development goals. The coach's role was to facilitate self-discovery of actions for improvement and development; to hold up the "mirror" to provide clarity and self-reflection and to focus on what needs to be done; addressing real issues taking place in the work environment; and to identify strategies to accelerate progress. For many, it was initially confronting and hard work; this was not a space for hand-holding. Importantly, these sessions were steeped in personal accountability (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1997).

To further promote self awareness, a 360 degree feedback process was deployed in 2010. All participants (learners) targeted for the survey were required to reflect and assess themselves against all 67 Lominger competencies, along with their chosen raters. In VOICES™, the Lominger 360 degree evaluation and feedback system, each rater is asked to rate the importance of each of the competencies as well as provide skill evaluations for the person requesting the feedback, "the learner" (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1997). A rich and detailed report was prepared for each team leader, manager and member of the Library Executive, coupled with a one on one debriefing session with an expert in the application of this tool. For some of the leaders, this was the first time they had experienced this type of evaluation and the findings were, in some cases, affirming as well as challenging. Despite initial reactions, pleasingly and reflective of the organisational culture, most participants openly shared their reviews and responses to feedback with their managers and in some cases their teams. All leaders agreed to identify at least one development goal in response to the feedback received.

The competencies have since been systematically integrated into key staff policies, procedures and documentation, e.g. recruitment, induction, probation, annual performance plans and job enrichment portfolios. Intagliata *et al.* (2000, p. 16) assert if the competency "model is the right one, it needs to applied aggressively, creatively and comprehensively". The competencies and associated support documents and materials provide a reference point for developing actions for self improvement as well as evaluation of performance. Quite early in the process the commitment of team leaders and managers was evident as

reflected in improved authenticity in discussions with their teams and improved alignment of goal setting activities to performance feedback.

Findings

The use of a consultant and the use of validated instruments introduced a degree of objectivity needed to help remove perceptions of bias or prejudice in our assessment of workforce and leadership requirements. The Library Executive made a firm commitment to ensuring the program's success and was integral to both the implementation and evaluation of chosen strategies.

A critical discussion at a review point focussed on measuring the success of the leadership initiative; how could it be measured? Perceptible changes had been noticed by the Library Executive, for instance, improved self confidence in leaders, a greater preparedness to address underperformance, and that career and developmental plans were more considered and constructive in their design.

An institutional employee climate survey conducted in 2007 and repeated in 2010 further reveals the impact of investing in leadership. Performance ratings for factors such as: I have confidence in the ability of senior management; senior managers are good role models for staff; I have confidence in the ability of my manager improved significantly (see Figure 1).

Evaluation against the Investors in People (IIP) Standard provides an opportunity to specifically test the application and integration of human resource management strategies and the success of individual and organisational change management strategies. Assessment against the standard can assist in determining whether a return on investment in people management and development strategies is being achieved. A recent IIP review in 2010 affirmed leadership development initiatives as good practice; further verified with the first IIP Silver Status to be awarded in Australasia under a new recognition program.

While much of the discussion so far has focussed on developing staff with potential; participation in the initiative also afforded opportunities to consider new and different approaches to dealing with the "difficult" or "underperforming" employee. Through three-way coaching, and deployment of other tools, a number of underlying issues were uncovered and dealt with, and a greater appreciation of a staff member's strengths was enabled. This, in several cases resulted in a fundamental shift from being a difficult employee to an engaged, productive staff member.

Importantly, our capacity to fill leadership positions from within is improving. A number of staff have since progressed to higher level roles or are preparing themselves for roles in the future. Through heightened awareness of the leadership success profile, an enhanced appreciation for individual strengths has emerged. For some, roles have been redesigned or reshaped to optimise available talent. In other cases, we have challenged the notion of years of service as a precursor to leadership development and the allocation of leadership assignments, and as a result, early career leaders are being accelerated, better supported and importantly, filling needed leadership roles (Intagliata *et al.*, 2000).

Practical implications

As mentioned earlier, a commitment by the executive or senior leadership team is critical to this type of developmental program. Financial commitment is also a consideration through the engagement of the consultant and career coaching services. Not insignificant energy and time is required from all parties involved, e.g. scheduling time for workshops, coaching sessions, subsequent actions and review; challenging in an environment of ever-increasing priorities.

Challenging also is the management of perceptions and expectations of staff. It is fair to say that there was some disaffection from staff who were not included in the first round of coaching. Subsequently, opportunities to support both external and internal coaching are being investigated.

In building a sustainable approach for leadership development and evaluation a number of strategies are in place. Projects and job assignments are being used to provide necessary experience and opportunity to exercise the "competency muscle" (Charan, 2005, Intagliata *et al.*, 2000 and Lombardo and Eichinger, 1997). Structured feedback against the competencies is requisite in any leadership activity, e.g. secondment, acting at a higher level. The setting of annual goals for career and personal development must include a goal aligned to the development of one or more leadership competencies (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1997). An internal coaching network is in development with full deployment planned for 2012. Four staff have been identified as coaches and will enable considerable reach and access for those interested in using a career coach to identify actions for development.

To acknowledge the need to "bridge the gap" between leadership levels and to provide further clarity on how to achieve this, a leadership development framework is nearing completion. Strategies, examples of evidence and results are mapped to the success profiles for both CAT and LEC. We foresee the Leadership Development Framework being used in career planning, coaching and personal development; providing the desired signposts to mark the leadership journey.

Conclusion

This exercise of leadership development and evaluation has been significant for number of reasons. It represents a new milestone in our commitment to quality and service excellence and best practice. UWL has overcome barriers, both real and perceived, to grow leaders from within; and dispelled myths about what leadership is and how it can be achieved. We have examined ways to accelerate an individual's progress.

A commitment to new methods to support and evaluate leadership development initiatives has resulted in changed perceptions of leadership aspiration, aptitude and ability. The identification of required competencies has provided improved goal clarity, insight on how to become skilled in a given competency, and a reference point for evaluation. Importantly the performance of leaders has improved. There is qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate both a commitment to leadership development and the application of desired behaviours associated with the competencies. The capacity to grow and promote from within has also improved; evidence that the succession management initiative is being achieved. Through this initiative, we have signalled what it takes to be a high performing organisation and the roles leaders play in sustaining this aim.

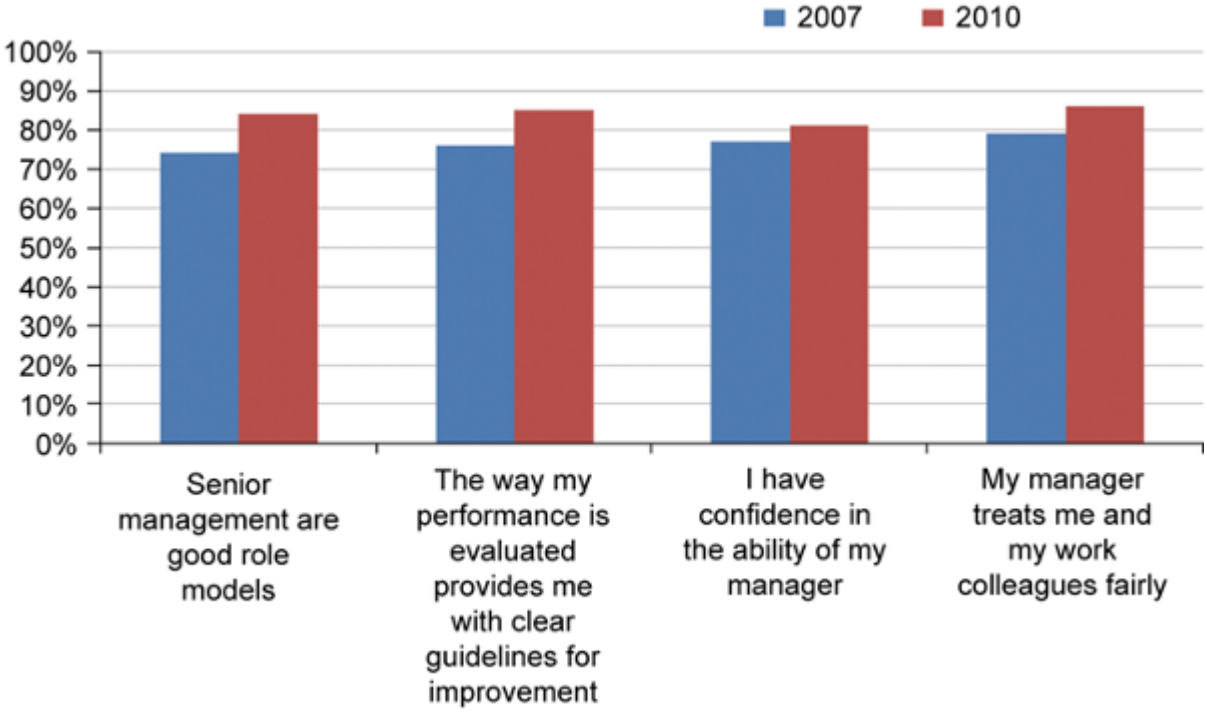

Figure 1 *Employee climate survey results*

Library Executive Committee (LEC)	Coordinators Action Team (CAT)
Perspective	Building effective teams
Managing vision and mission	Performance management* *(confronting direct reports)
Political savvy	Organising
Strategic agility	Drive for results
Business acumen	Intellectual horsepower
Self knowledge	Organisational agility
Developing others	Innovation management
Comfort around top management	Managing vision and mission
Negotiating	

Table I. Leadership success profiles developed from the Lominger leadership competencies

Table I *Leadership success profiles developed from the Lominger leadership competencies*

Competency	Confronting direct reports (part of the competency family of Courage), most organisations are running leaner today. With rapid change and team-based efforts increasing, problem performers can't be hidden as they may have been in the past. Overcoming your reluctance to deal with them is key to your unit's performance and your career as well. Managers who excel at confronting direct reports are timely, consistent, focus on performance gaps and help the person succeed. But if the effort fails, taking timely but compassionate action to separate the person from the organisation is the true test of management courage

Source: Lombardo and Eichinger, 2009, p. 74

Table II. Roadmap to guide improvement (adapted from Lombardo and Eichinger)

Table II *Roadmap to guide improvement (adapted from Lombardo and Eichinger)*

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Further Reading

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