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Leadership learning: building on grounded theory to explore the role of critical reflection in leadership learning

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Keywords
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Leadership Learning: building on Grounded Theory to explore the role of critical reflection in leadership learning.

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ABSTRACT: A study of eight senior managers from different organisations has combined Critical Theory and Grounded Theory approaches. This study builds on the findings of a previous substantive study (Kriflik 2002) which identified the most successful leadership strategies, as perceived by participants. The most successful strategies are those in which leaders focussed on their own behaviours, attitudes and actions. Building on these findings this study explores leadership competencies and the mechanisms which enhance, or enable, leaders' ability to learn such competencies. Interviews were conducted and transcribed, then analysed, and became the basis for the choice of subsequent participants. The study identified critical reflection as crucial to leadership learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a complex phenomenon and hence requires a suitable methodology to capture this complexity. Grounded theory is an inductive, theory-discovery method that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). More succinctly, it is the "discovery of theory from data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:1). The method involves the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of data, adopting an overall framework which is systematic, emergent, non-linear and without researcher preconceptions, in order to generate a theory about a substantive area. The Grounded Theory methodology was utilised for a previous study of leadership in a large Australian organisation and this resulted in the emergence of a substantive theory about the behaviour of leaders (Kriflik 2002; 2004). One element of this theory, that of leaders focusing on self-change, is the impetus for the present study. This approach to data collection may be further enhanced with elements of critical theory, specifically the significance of reflection to the learning process (Mezirow 1991). It is this aspect of the leadership theory which is now of interest; in particular the ability of leaders to learn their leadership abilities. This study differs from most analytical leadership studies in that it combines the two theoretical approaches to obtain data and to facilitate active reflection by participants on leadership behaviours. In this preliminary research eight participants were interviewed following the principles of theoretical sampling, and a number of concepts emerged which were identified as competencies or as the learning of those competencies. This study presents a model of how this learning is enhanced through critical reflection in multiple spheres of leadership activity.

Literature

The literature contains a number of models and approaches that can be employed by leaders with a view to changing themselves and the manner in which they look at, and react to, the external world.

These include *reflection-in-action* (Schon, 1983), *reframing* (Bolman and Deal, 1997), *imaginization* (Morgan, 1993), *inside-out approach* (Covey, 1990), *self-leadership* (Manz, 1992, 1986; Manz and Sims, 1990, 1980; Luthans and Davis, 1979), and *minimising attainment deficit* (Kriflik, 2002). It is critical reflection that provides the common thread in all of the above approaches employed by leaders who wish to change themselves. Within the learning process critical reflection is the crucial element that can lead to personal change (Mezirow 1991).

Individual change is not possible without personal reflection. Schon (1983) elaborates on the concept of reflection-in-action, by means of which leaders (or in his case, professionals) engage in the process of “a reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situation” (Schon,1983:130). Reflection-in-action is a spiral process of appreciation, action, and reappreciation. In the reflective conversation, efforts to solve reframed problems suggest new directions for reshaping the situation, which yield new discoveries and lead to a continuation of the reflective conversation. In accepting that most leaders employ reflective thinking during the problem solving process Mezirow (1991) suggests that critical reflection goes beyond contemplating past decisions and strategies to an examination of the assumptions that guided these decisions. Reflective thinking and critical reflection could be viewed as end points of a continuum. The move is from the ability to reflectively identify issues to the ability to analyse the combined effect of individual leader motivations and structural constraints in the situation. Depicting leadership as a continuum of ability provides a mechanism for exploring how leaders learn, particularly when, as identified by Mezirow (1991), within our society (in our case the workplace) there are limited opportunities to learn how to think critically.

Once leaders recognise the need to change their approaches and strategies, reframing can assist them to discover new ways of learning from experience. Reframing involves using “multiple lenses to get a better reading of what they are up against and what they might do about it” (Bolman and Deal, 1997:xiv). The ability to reframe experience enriches and broadens a leader’s repertoire and expands their options to deal creatively with organisational issues. In similar vein, Morgan (1993:21) uses the concept of imaginization (or creative management) to show how leaders can mobilise images and ideas to organise in new ways, “rethink themselves” and learn how to see themselves anew. New ways of seeing is also part of the theme of Covey’s (1990) inside-out approach to principle-centred leadership. For Covey the base developmental level of any person commences with the trustworthiness they develop at the personal level of their relationship with themselves. This involves developing both their character (what they are) and their competence (what they can do). If people want to bring about meaningful change they must develop their trustworthiness, which lies entirely within their own circle of influence. Thus, “inside-out means to start first with self” (Covey, 1990:63).

In contrast, critical reflection moves beyond the focus on self to develop an understanding of the external influences affecting individual behaviour. Critical reflection can provoke a reconsideration of previously accepted 'truths' and clarify that the way the world and events are understood by the

individual may not correspond with the actual situation. Developing an understanding of structural influences beyond their control can assist leaders to clarify their own motivations when making decisions that impact on others. For example, leaders will make choices even when there is a known undesirable consequence because the individual determines that there is more to be gained than lost in the immediate evaluation of that choice. This process is described as reflexivity and has also been referred to as 'self endangerment' (Beck, 1992, p.48), because the longer term impact is either not the priority at the moment of choice or it is not known. Risk perception and response are core to reflexive living (Adams, 1995; Beck, 1992) and decisions are often made in a reactive situation. For leaders whose decisions affect others, the difficulty is prioritising the potential personal impact of choices, including effect on status, political alliances, and personal needs, against the broader impact of those decisions.

To be effective leaders, supervisors should be aware of their own style and recognise any external influences and constraints that affect their behaviours. If these supervisors' behaviours, as leaders, are negatively affecting their subordinates one would expect that an effective leader recognises this negative affect and tries to reduce or eliminate it. Kriflik (2004:285) identifies self-change as a key leader strategy employed to reduce such negative affects and provides examples of leaders critically reflecting on their own leadership processes and recognising their contribution to negative actions and outcomes in the workplace. As stated by Manz (1992:2) "if we ever hope to be effective leaders of others, we need first to be able to effectively lead ourselves". He defines the process of self-leadership as "the leadership that we exercise over ourselves" (Manz, 1992:2) and "the process of influencing oneself" (Manz, 1992:6). This influence over oneself, it can be argued, is that which manifests itself as a result of the awareness of one's own behaviours, the recognition of one's own contribution to workplace issues, and the desire to make one's contribution a positive one. For Covey (1990) the 'inside-out' approach is the first step in becoming a *principle-centred leader*, however Manz (1992) emphasises the achievement of 'self-leadership' is the first step in the process of becoming a *superleader* (the ability to lead others to lead themselves). Self-leadership, in itself, is a process comprised of two main types of strategies – behavioural and cognitive. Behavioural-focused strategies are concerned with effective behaviour and action, and include such strategies as self-observation, self-goal setting, cue management, self-reward, self-criticism, and rehearsal. Cognitive-focused strategies are concerned with effective thinking and feeling, and include such strategies as building natural rewards into tasks, focusing thinking on natural rewards, and establishing effective thought patterns (Manz and Sims, 1990).

The self-leadership concept had first appeared in the management literature in 1979 under the guise of 'behavioral self-management' (Luthans and Davis, 1979). These authors remarked that prior to this date "almost no one has paid any attention to managing oneself more effectively" (Luthans and Davis, 1979:43). The major contribution of Luthans and Davis was to suggest that the use of the usual three-

term operant conditioning analysis of antecedent cues, behaviours, and consequences (ABC) to predict and control human behaviour was too limiting in that it failed to take account of human cognitions (thoughts, feelings and self-evaluative behaviour). Their proposal was to utilize social learning theory, and hence to include the additional mediating role of cognitive processes in the analysis to create a four-term contingency model: S (stimulus), O (cognitive processes), B (behaviour), and C (consequences) (Luthans and Davis, 1979:44). Thus, this analysis suggests that relevant stimulus cues, cognitive processes, and response consequences must all be brought under control by the leader (Luthans, 1992). Here it can also be argued that this 'self-leadership', or 'behavioral self-management', should manifest itself as self-change.

Leadership is a process not a position (Parry, 1997:13). Essentially, leadership is a social influence process (Hunt, 1991). The central aspect of Parry's (1997:25) thesis revolves around the contention that leadership is an interactive social and psychological process. Rost (1993:4) also conceived of the essential nature of leadership as a dynamic processual relationship whereby leaders and followers relate to one another to achieve a common purpose. Hence, leadership research needs to investigate the nature of this social influence process. It is that process of leadership that now needs most attention from researchers (Rost, 1993:4). This study of how supervisor's may learn their leadership abilities reflects this need.

METHODOLOGY

This purpose has directed the researchers towards the use of a qualitative research approach. Orthodox or Glaserian grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001) was the methodology chosen for the previous research on which this study builds. This earlier research developed the theory of 'minimising attainment deficit' (Kriflik, 2002; 2004). Orthodox grounded theory generates an inductive theory about a substantive area "that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is relevant and problematic for those involved" (Glaser, 1978:93). Accordingly, the *aims* of this present research are to discover the main concern of the participants in the substantive area (developing leadership competencies) which leads them to adopt a particular view of leadership, and subsequently to explain the behavioural processes involved in leadership that resolve this main concern. Critical reflection adds dimension to the methodology chosen because it is an acknowledged and significant influence on the self-change process that results from self re-evaluation and subsequent behaviour modification.

Qualitative methodologies such as these are more suitable for researching complex situations, where the researcher wishes to be more sensitive to contextual factors which are exposed within the research process rather than imposed on the leadership process. Within the field of leadership, Conger (1998:107) has noted that "qualitative studies remain relatively rare". Parry (1998) has argued the case for the use of grounded theory as a valid method for researching the process of leadership. This

present research has taken up these challenges and involved the systematic gathering of grounded empirical data through interviews. Even the act of participating in the research can bring into focus issues that were previously secondary. Thus while some interview questions triggered critical reflection, it became apparent that participants had actively engaged with the reflective process, resulting in the re-consideration of a stance previously taken. When participant discussion of an issue suggested that the outcome was less than he/she desired, probing was utilised to explore the degree that critical reflection, if any, may have taken place. This would lead to participants exploring their perceptions of any learning outcomes that they derived from the process. Thus while the intent of the research is not to influence the participants' behaviour, their consideration of the research questions may, and have been seen to, provide the 'fateful moment' that Giddens (1991) has identified as a catalyst for change.

Parry (1998:85) contends that leadership is a social influence process and that mainstream research methodologies have been partially unsuccessful in theorising about the nature of these processes. Grounded theory, if rigorously applied, can help to overcome these deficiencies. As a methodology it is particularly suitable for meeting the interpretive requirements of generating a "sensitive understanding" (Brooks, 1998:5) of the processes by which people make sense of their organisational lives. The study is significant in exploring:

- what constitutes a successful leader–follower interaction;
- the extent to which leaders learn from interactions and experiences; and
- the social processes that may trigger critical reflection and so stimulate leadership learning.

The purpose of generating explanatory theory is to further our understanding of social and psychological phenomena (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986:3). The objective of researchers in developing such theory is to explore the social processes that present within human interactions (Streubert and Carpenter, 1995:145), described by Chenitz and Swanson (1986:3) as "the basic patterns common in social life". In the study of people who are sharing some common circumstances "grounded theorists base their research on the assumption that each such group shares a specific social psychological problem that is not necessarily articulated" (Hutchinson, 1986:114). The central issue in a grounded theory study is to know what our informants' problem (or main concern) is and how they seek to resolve it (Glaser, 1992:177). The research product itself constitutes a theoretical formulation or integrated set of conceptual hypotheses about the substantive area under study.

The study context is one in which the senior level managers within eight organisations have sought development of their leadership abilities, including participation in a leadership network. These managers were approached through this network or suggested by other participants. The organisations are all located in a large coastal city of NSW, and include some large government authorities.

All participants fit into the age group in the range 45 to 60, and all have lengthy work experience. Participants are listed by pseudonym in the table below.

Pseudonym	Gender	Industry Sector	Management Level	Staff Size	Interview Date
Cindy	F	Private	Operations	200	20/04/2004
Larry	M	Private	Senior	5 -10	22/04/2004
Gavin	M	Public	Senior	20	13/05/2004
Gregory	M	Public	Senior	200	11/11/2004
Kent	M	Public	Middle	10	22/11/2004
Ruth	F	Public	Senior	100	22/12/2004
Megan	F	Public	Senior	35	14/03/2005
Wilson	M	Public	Middle	10 - 15	14/04/2005

FINDINGS

In this study participants identified diverse key competencies that they perceived as required by leaders, regardless of the organisation within which they are located. These key competencies were viewed as comprising the foundational leadership capabilities. Those that emerged in this study were grouped according to the spheres of leadership activity that participants referred to. These spheres are:

- Leader- relating to ability to lead;
- Intrapersonal – relating to self-awareness and context;
- Interpersonal – relating to interaction with followers.

Participants viewed the workplace circumstances within which the competencies are utilised as determining variations in the application of such. The application of these competencies was defined by participants through their perception of themselves as leaders. The findings indicate that these perceptions are influenced by the breadth of experience of each leader. “Leadership is about dealing with the people. It’s not necessarily about how you handle strategy or anything like that. Its about being a leader at times that people are following you, and that people follow you for a reason … its following someone out of respect or because they believe in what they’re doing …” (Cindy *interview*). Such comments underline the importance of critical reflection in learning and transferring leadership competencies to apply them in a different setting. Participants’ perceptions of the competencies related to each sphere and the process of developing these should be of interest to those interested in leadership development.

Leader Ability

Participants indicated that as leaders moving through their work careers they are continuously enhancing their competencies. This means that with each new position they as leaders may be significantly increasing certain competencies, depending on the challenges presented thereby. “As you go along you gradually pick up tools along the way …” (Cindy *interview*).

Several participants identified self-awareness as a precursor to making self-change, stating this allowed a leader to improve their leadership competencies. Cindy (*interview*) displays such self awareness by evaluating the response to her trying something new: “sometimes I can incorporate something into my style, and also taking feedback from people around me too, from my staff, what

they like about the way I manage them, what they don't like". Larry (*interview*), on the other hand, indicated he had lacked self awareness for a long time: "… and I didn't realise that I accumulated this way of doing it all …" and "that was difficult for me to understand because I had no intention of doing any of that". Larry stated he took a long time to finally realise the consequences of his actions. Gavin (*interview*) clearly is self aware: "I've learnt to know my strengths and weaknesses". "I know that I've got [weaknesses] and I'm always trying to work on those …".

Acknowledging current level of leader competence was regarded by participants as necessary for realising the value of actively learning from experience and becoming more effective. Gavin (*interview*) actively reflects on things that go wrong: "where you've stuffed up, and to actually deliberately try to work out what went wrong and how to make sure it doesn't happen again". On reflection, Megan (*interview*) also acknowledges that she "take[s] a little bit from different people and [she is] viewing changes too with more exposure and more personal experience as well".

Megan (*interview*) believes that to learn from role models she must ask "what do you think you don't do well and being very honest about that". Megan, in the same vane, questions her own ability to manage 'leadership risk', indicating an openness to take on new ideas.

Intrapersonal Interaction

A key factor identified by participants is that of relating to people. Gavin (*interview*) "started experimenting with what doesn't work … and what would work". Cindy (*interview*) also takes "the opportunity to trial things along the way with different workforces …". Wilson (*interview*) concurs with other participants in his statement "the workplace is a fascinating place to learn. You experiment and you see what works for some people and you find out if it works for you". These people play an active part in their own learning by having identified an area of competence they wish to develop or strengthen.

The need for such development or self improvement was discussed by all participants, often with reference to specific skills. Cindy (*interview*) is "always reading to just see what the current thinking is" because she "saw people put into management roles … [who] were really bad at it and I was determined that that wasn't going to happen to me". Megan (*interview*) identifies a self improvement need when she "think[s] they do that better than [her]". Gavin (*interview*) tries "to emulate people that inspire me and people whose [leadership] style I feel comfortable with". Ruth (*interview*) chooses to emulate those people where "I really like the way they handled that". Each study participant indicated preparedness to make self change and viewed open-mindedness as important in being able to learn how others approach certain issues. This was viewed by participants as learning and adapting alternative approaches to become part of their own repertoire.

Another way for supervisors to attain new competencies and avoid making mistakes, identified by several participants, was the critiquing the interaction of others. Larry watched a project go wrong and

learned from other's failures to "make sure that never happened if I ever got into that situation". Cindy (*interview*) also "was determined that that wasn't going to happen to [her]". Cindy (*interview*) discussed other competencies which made her leadership effective. She indicated she had learnt the ability to align her vision with the organisation's strategic direction, thus ensuring her own values were not compromised and assisting her staff in achieving organisational goals.

Interpersonal Interaction

In order to manage effectively, participants viewed it as a priority that supervisors delegate responsibilities. Yet, for Larry (*interview*) this has been difficult: "you want to keep your own work to yourself, you don't want to let go. It's this letting go I've really got to come to grips with". This has been a tough learning process for Larry. Ruth (*interview*) has learned over time that being out talking to staff is important and she "worried less about letting some of the other things drop".

The need to tailor leadership approaches for the each person that the leader interacts with was recognised as an essential skill. Gavin (*interview*) does "believe that the leadership skills required for each person in a team are quite different [with] some commonality of course". Cindy (*interview*) agrees that you "use different skills for dealing with different people". Wilson (*interview*) sees the difference as "more personality based" and so require his approach to be tailored to the individual. Megan (*interview*) perceives her 35 staff to be "all on different levels and I'm on a different level for each of them too".

In another example, Gavin (*interview*) engages with individuals because he thinks it is "very important to spend time learning about the individual and try to assess what kind of leadership they need". In this way Gavin also learns "things that demotivate people and how to loose people". Wilson (*interview*) bases his management style on individual mentoring, while Kent (*interview*) listens to what his staff say. Megan (*interview*) acknowledges the extra effort she needs to make to ensure that new staff do not become demotivated, stating that "anyone's new they need a lot of support from the manager". Being attentive to and/or aware of individual's needs emerged as a key competency for all participants. As Cindy (*interview*) says of her staff that "they need to know that you value them as a person and that you're worried about their welfare".

Cindy (*interview*) deliberately chooses a style of management that will "let people take the empowerment that they choose to take to do their jobs more effectively and I'm more there as a guide and mentor …". Cindy also has learnt that her staff, even when offered empowerment, will not always take it. Her staff set their own "level of empowerment that people will take".

Listening, for example, has been identified by six of the eight participants as a leader competency. Cindy (*interview*) has learned "you can avoid problems simply by being available to listen to the dumb stuff because sometimes it can be really stupid and … to get in there early and understand what's going on in their heads". Wilson (*interview*) stresses the importance of listening and adds that

"the communication process, in both directions, are core skills". In a similar way Gavin (*interview*) has "learned … how to observe my team members" having developed his "skills in observing human behaviour … a vital part of being an effective leader …".

Contextual awareness was perceived by some to be a key competency, whether it is of the work situation, of the organisation's culture, or of the probable impact of change. Cindy (*interview*) states she has learned to "change your management style or adjust it to fit" if "you're aware of the things that make up an organisational culture", whereas the awareness of an impact of change may cause a "level of compromise" which Cindy reflects on as causing a "constant conflict in your mind". Such conflict is a strong indication that critical reflection is taking place. This will trigger a response by Cindy as an attempt to lessen the impact of change on her staff.

Other participants indicated they were at a different stage in their acknowledgment of the change and its impacts, and still need to develop competencies to lessen the impact. Larry (*interview*) was only at the realisation stage: "they're just major changes and some of the stuff was horrendous". This response was prompted by the interview question and Larry provided no examples of how critical reflection mediated his leadership interactions.

Critical Reflection and Leadership Learning Across the Three Spheres of Activity

Participants identified specific skills that they perceived to be learnable. All participants agreed that 'relating to people' is a learnable competency. Larry (*interview*) simply states it as "if you can work with people". For Cindy (*interview*) it is the culture, indirectly the relationship with people, so that "if you're aware of the things that make up an organisational culture there is potential that you can be flexible enough to change your management style or adjust it to fit". Gavin (*interview*) links relating to people and the organisation's culture: "the fundamental leadership skills relate to people, and they're transportable. It's just that the roles of the people and sometimes the culture of the people is quite different". This implies that 'relating to people' and 'adapting to workplace culture' are key learnable competencies. Kent's (*interview*) workplace has a culture that requires him to adapt his style, at times, to be more directive.

When adapting to different workplace cultures there will also be different communication styles. To adapt to a communication style Gavin (*interview*) "had to adjust, not to reduce my own level of professionality but to adapt to be able to communicate with that different concept of the world". He has identified this as a learnable, and important, skill. When adapting, taking care with power so as not to overuse it has been identified by Gavin as a key learnable competency. He advocates taking a 'gently, gently' approach, learning about the organisation, before "letting [their] ego get too much in the road".

Larry (*interview*) perceives that seeing ahead (having a vision) is a key learnable competency and that this enhances the ability to make decisions, also a key competency. Gregory (*interview*) reinforces

this notion through his criticism of managers who make decision “without the care”, implying that they may be ill-considered decisions.

For Megan (*interview*), continual learning is essential. She states that when people achieve “their first management role” the challenge is to start letting go of some technical skills and start embracing leadership habits. Gregory (*interview*) too saw learning as essential: “I learnt that nothing should ever stop learning”. Gregory (*interview*) identified the value of “time to reflect and see now where are thing I need to do”. He becomes more critical in his reflection when asking himself “how could I do it better”. Wilson (*interview*) also evidenced reflection when discussing how he dealt with issues and it is evident he is comparing past with present performance. He also maintains that he needs “time to absorb things and reflect on them”. While doing an educational leadership course Wilson “recognised that [he] was doing a lot of things [he] was reading about. By reflecting on his performance Wilson “realise[d] that [he] was on track as a leader”. He had thought back over time and acknowledged how he had changed his leadership style to suit the situation.

When Ruth is stuck, she reflects on a previous role model: “what would that person do in this situation, how should I handle this?” Ruth is cognisant that she needs to engage with her staff to keep up the level of understanding about the organisation’s direction: “they’re not focused on the things that I think are important, they’re focused on the things they think are important”! Ruth also reflects back over work experiences and comes to realisations such as: “I worked with someone who I thought did a great job but the longer I worked with that person, the less confident I was that what they were doing was great”. Ruth also admits “often I don’t necessarily end up doing what I imagine that person would do, but it gives me a moment to stop and think…?”

These findings indicate that there are some key competencies, which may constitute a core set for supervisors, and which are essential for effective leadership. It is the level of utilisation of such competencies that seems to change, but there is evidence that some level of utilisation is a base line for minimal effectiveness to exist. For this effectiveness to exist competencies have been learnt. A direct relationship between critical reflection and higher levels of utilisation was found to exist. This critical reflection, therefore, is the key for leaders to learn from their experiences.

DISCUSSION

The above findings refer to the building on of skills and competencies on the journey through one’s career and are highly relevant to the learning of leadership competencies. It is clear that leaders do not leave behind skills attained in one position and then develop a new set in another. It may be the case that some skills are less called on in different positions and so ongoing development of such skills is not possible until a further change of position takes place. The following discussion will deal with those issues that participants in the study raised that support the notion of leadership learning.

The underlying theme of interest in this study has been this learning of leader competencies. The experience of participants suggests that a supervisor can attain that minimal level of effectiveness through reflective learning and experience, and that the level of effectiveness generally increases over time and breadth of work experience. We should accept this as evidence of the learning of leader competencies. When such competencies have been learned they can be 'transferred' (skills can be applied in a different setting) between organisational positions. Two significant concepts that influence leadership development have emerged in this study.

Firstly, there is a degree of learnability of competencies. Gavin (*interview*) has observed that "the biggest difference in the role of the team, the more challenging that is and so I sometimes wonder when I see CEOs move from banking to welfare, or making a huge change in the functionality of the team". In this context learnability is a function of what a leader has had the opportunity to experience and critically reflect on. Certain positions provide certain experience and lead to enhancement of particular competencies. Other competencies remain undeveloped. Gavin clearly believes "those competencies can be learned and that's something I've picked up over the years because I've worked for quite a few organisations". It is all a matter of degree. Larry (*interview*) identifies limits to the degree of learnability in that "a principal can go from one school to another … I don't know if [they] could go from a school to running Woolworth …".

Such comments by participant could be interpreted as recognition that many of the competencies referred to by participants have rich, contextual data associated with them which exemplifies conditions and intervening variables. For this reason we cannot assume that the competencies referred to by participants constitute a global list which is applicable in numerous organisations, however it is safe to assume that the mechanisms for learning such competencies have a commonality among workplaces in general. The self-awareness that the participants used as their starting point in reflecting on their own leadership is recognised as crucial within leadership literature that describes self awareness as a fundamental competency. For example, Daft (2005:194) states "Self-awareness might be considered the basis of all the other competencies". He considers it important to understanding ones' own emotions and their impact on our relationship with other people. Cindy and Gavin demonstrated their learning of self-awareness, in contrast to Larry who demonstrates a lack of such learning. Critical reflection theorists (Giddens 1991; Mezirow 1991; Brookfield 2001) would argue that such differences in participant self-awareness may well be a function of opportunity to critically reflect on the context and structures that influence individual actions.

Secondly, this leads to the assertion based on participants' observations in a number of these interviews that *critical reflection* is a crucial concept for leadership development. Critical reflection is a key to learning, as stated above and reinforced by theorists such as Schon (1983) Mezirow (1991) and Brookfield (2001) and is clearly evident as part of leadership learning. This was evidenced by those participants who articulate a need for reflection time. There were clear indications that such

reflection did assist some participants to identify instances of reflexivity, as discussed by Beck (1992) and Adams (1995). This was apparent in both Cindy's and Ruth's interviews. Whereas Cindy regarded herself as able to negotiate between organisational demands and her own values, Ruth was still considering her response to values conflict. This was evidenced when she considered the tension staff experience when they are strongly committed to their organisation and want to protect it, but at the same time they are embedded in a culture where employees want to protect their jobs. This was recognition that sometimes structural constraints create a values conflict for individuals and can thus result in indecision and affect morale. When asked about her reflecting Ruth indicated that she felt she didn't do enough, that she never had enough time and often responded to situations reflexively.

By actively reflecting on performance and perceived lack of time to focus on important things participants demonstrate the reflexive conflict involved in learning from work and life experiences. Larry's reported conflict with a colleague who apparently perceived Larry to be interested in getting his job led Larry to identify his own contradictory behaviour. The colleague was perceived to have blocked Larry to achieve outcomes in his work. Later when Larry was describing the new CEO's approach he seemed to be implying that he resisted some of the changes she was trying to implement. When asked whether his previous experience with the difficult colleague had helped him better cope with this situation it dawned on Larry that this was, in fact, a similar situation and he was now the one who was blocking. This for Larry seemed to be that 'fateful moment' that Giddens (1991) described and also highlighted a values conflict that he had not previously recognised. Hence, Larry has been operating below that 'threshold' of reflection at which leadership learning commences.

The threshold for learning leader competencies is an ability to identify issues through reflection. Participants' statements presented here are evidence that critical reflection, operating above this threshold, does lead to learning and so can be viewed as an essential ingredient to developing leadership competencies.

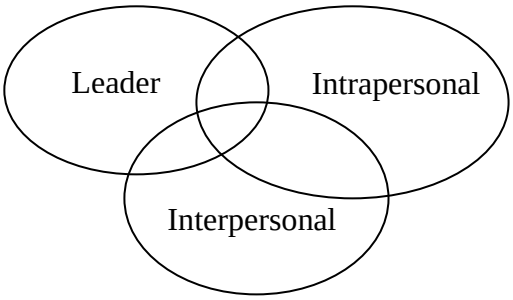

Figure 1: Three spheres of leadership activity

The emergence of three spheres of leadership activity, as depicted in Figure 1, suggests that that leaders operating in one sphere are developing their leadership competencies in that sphere, and leaders operating in all three spheres at a time may be developing such competencies at a higher level. The principles of set theory then imply that the overlap, in the case of all three, signifies a smaller number of leaders may be fitting into this group. This suggests that despite years of management

experience some supervisors are unable to develop leadership competencies. Larry's interview responses are clearly evidence of this.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified literature which supports the notion of a continuum of reflective ability. It has shown how such ability contributes to the learning of leader competencies, particularly when leaders engage in critical reflection in all three spheres of leadership activity identified.

The case is made that competencies are built on through one's career and this notion was found to apply to leadership competencies. Once learnt, leadership competencies can be transferred to a different work setting. If they are relevant to the new setting they are enhanced; if not they remain static until a further opportunity/need arises.

All participants engaged in reflection, but only some in critical reflection. These incidences of critical reflection coincide with significant 'learning' events and are evidence of the existence of a 'threshold' of reflection above which leadership learning commences. In some instances it was the interview question which triggered the 'fateful moment' (Giddens 1991) and precipitated the participant's crossing of this 'threshold'.

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