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Leaders can learn to change; some do: a qualitative study

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Abstract

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Keywords

leadership, subordinate behaviour, self-change, Grounded Theory

Disciplines

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Leaders can learn to change; some do: a qualitative study.

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Stream E. Management Education & Development
Stream N. Leadership
Stream O. General Management
Stream Q. Organisational behaviour

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Abstract. The behaviour of organisational subordinates is significantly affected by the attitudes and actions of their supervisor. By changing themselves, leaders can therefore have a crucial impact not only on the behaviour of their subordinates but also on the extent to which those subordinates perceive that they are achieving their organisational potential. This paper presents a conceptual model of the process through which organisational leaders can attempt to change themselves with the objective of changing the behaviour of their subordinates. Using a grounded methodology, data has been collected and analysed from a large Australian public sector bureaucracy by means of participant observation, document analysis, personal interviews. The model gives further support to the role of cognitive processes in social learning theory. The key focus of this paper is on the evidence of leadership competencies being learnt, and in particular how leaders can learn to change their own behaviours.

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Introduction

The research from which this paper is drawn generated a conceptual model of the leadership processes in a large public sector organisation. The purpose of this paper is to expound on a specific aspect of the findings of the original research.

The literature is still sparse regarding the determination of theory from qualitative studies to explain the leadership processes at work. Of the qualitative methodologies available to researchers, however, grounded theory is the most concerned with moving past the description of phenomena and onto theory generation. The qualitative methodology chosen has enabled this research to contribute to the leadership literature in the form of a processual theory, and a framework for interpreting supervisor-subordinate interactions. This framework consists of three categories of leader strategy. These are leader strategies which focus on the subordinate, on the environment, and on the leader. This paper will focus on the application of the leader focused strategies.

The setting is a government department (pseudonym AGRO) that manages the traffic and road system in a state in Australia, in conjunction with state and local government agencies. AGRO's operational context is defined by four major characteristics. First, it is a large and complex organisation. Second, it operates within the public sector. Third, its culture is engineering dominated. Fourth, it has operated in a less tumultuous change environment than has been experienced in most other areas of the private and public sector. These characteristics have defined the environment for the development of the organisational values and behavioural context within AGRO, and act to frame the reasons for the aims, purpose and significance of the study.

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. In this study fifteen participants were personally interviewed, following the principles of theoretical sampling, before the model was considered to be saturated. All but two of these fifteen participants had a supervisory role as well as their subordinate role and so provided extremely rich data for this study.

An unexpected aspect of the emergent theory was the importance that some participants placed on their supervisors displaying leadership qualities by showing concern for them and by taking responsibility for issues. This regard for a supervisor was very high when the supervisor was perceived to modify their own behaviour in order to resolve issues. It is this aspect of the findings that this paper presents.

The behaviour of organisational subordinates is significantly affected by the attitudes and actions of supervisors (Selvin, 1960). In particular, it is the nature of the relationship between subordinates and

their *immediate* supervisor that will determine how long subordinates will remain with an organisation and how productive they are whilst they are there (Buckingham and Coffman, 2000). One of the main concerns of organisational members is to be enabled to reach their overall potential (Kriflik, 2002). The problem of such members being constrained below their potential is a significant issue within mechanistic organisations such as hierarchical bureaucracies (Hales, 2002). People often feel confined and under-appreciated, and unable to do anything about the problem through their own efforts alone (Bensman and Lilienfeld, 1973). Within such organisations, subordinates tend to look to their own immediate supervisor to proactively intervene in the situation in order to assist them to reach their organisational potential (Kriflik, 2002).

As part of this proactive intervention, leaders can pursue a number of strategies for enabling their subordinates to reach their potential. The most frequently employed strategies include those that are aimed directly at changing the environmental context within which the subordinate works (such as planning and goal setting), and almost as frequently those that are aimed at changing the nature of the subordinate (such as education and training). Far less frequently employed, however, are those strategies that leaders can employ aimed directly at changing *themselves*. This is a crucial failing, especially in view of our earlier observation that the attitudes and actions of supervisors have a significant impact on their subordinates' behaviour.

Literature

The extant 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), and *self-leadership* (Manz, 1992, 1986; Manz and Sims, 1990, 1980; Luthans and Davis, 1979). These references are meant to give only a flavour of some of the major themes rather than constituting an exhaustive list.

Personal change is not possible without personal reflection. Schon (1983) elaborates 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. As suggested by this analysis, leaders often need to reframe their experiences in order to discover new issues and possibilities. 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. 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).

Manz (1992:2) also employs this concept through his belief that "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). Whereas for Covey (1990) the 'inside-out' approach is the first step in becoming a *principle-centred leader*, for Manz (1992) 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), who 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). Thus, this analysis suggests that relevant stimulus cues, cognitive processes, and response consequences, must all be brought under control by the leader (Luthans, 1992).

Methodology

Unfortunately, the approaches above tend to suffer from two critical defects, despite the conceptual breakthroughs that they have provided. Firstly, they tend to be primarily based on either limited data, intuition, personal experience, or casual observation rather than on systematically gathered and grounded empirical data. Secondly, they tend to generalise across numerous contextual environments, and accordingly have little to say about the nuances of particular organisational contexts. The findings presented in this paper aim to overcome these deficiencies.

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). An appropriate methodology must reflect this need.

This purpose has directed the researchers towards the use of a qualitative research approach. Orthodox or Glaserian grounded theory has been selected as the methodology of choice (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001). 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 (being supervised) 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.

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. Qualitative methodologies 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. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology aimed at generating rather than testing theory. 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 significance of the study is enhanced, too, because it expounds the viewpoint of 'subordinates' within AGRO, most of whom also have a supervisor role.

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". Grounded theorists base their research on the assumption that each group shares a specific social psychological problem that is not necessarily articulated (Hutchinson, 1993:185). 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.

Findings

In this study the main concern of the participants was that they felt constrained below the level of their natural ability and potential. One participant enunciates this point with her comment "in the whole time I've worked for [AGRO] I've felt a bit stifled and in that respect I haven't ever worked to my capacity …" (Kriflik, 2002:71). Subordinates perceive a leader to be a supervisor who is able to interact with them in order to facilitate their movement towards achievement of their full potential. When Vera was experiencing behavioural problems, "I had one bad experience with Steve when I was having trouble with Mark", she had sought support from her own supervisor but failed to obtain any. This made her reflect on the experience and consider that "perhaps I wasn't giving the best message but I wasn't aware of how to do it"(Kriflik, 2002:156). This main concern is resolved by supervisors and subordinates acting together to minimise the subordinates' attainment deficit. Attainment deficit is the condition resulting from a perceived gap between what a subordinate believes they are capable of achieving in the work environment, and what that subordinate perceives to be actually achieving. Thus, Minimising Attainment Deficit emerged as the core category and basic social process (BSP) of the study, and is composed of two major stages (or sub-core categories) of Leader Actioning and Subordinate Actioning. These two stages create a cyclic, context-action, process in which the actions of supervisors (as leaders) and subordinates impact one another in a continuous cycle of actions and consequences (Kriflik, 2002:68).

The core category and two sub-core categories are shown in Figure 1 below.

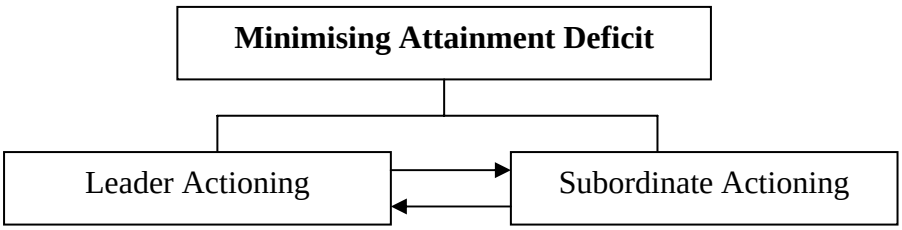

Figure 1: Leadership Process: Core and Sub-Core Categories

A significant outcome of this research is the cyclic nature of the leadership process, previously absent from the leadership literature, and the recognition that this process can enhance team involvement and cooperative behaviours of subordinates and increase their trust and respect of supervisors. This paper will only focus on aspects of Leader Actioning that are evidence of supervisors (as leaders) changing their behaviours for the benefit of their subordinates. For example, Megan sees the issue of her own behaviour as so important that if "they don't find me credible then I will change my level of performance to try to change that perception".

Leader actioning is comprehensively explained by Kriflik (2002:83-88) but sufficient detail will be provided in this paper to ensure that the reader has an understanding of the concepts presented.

Leader centred strategies are those strategies that leaders employ by focusing directly on themselves to improve some of their own attitudes and actions that may be adversely influencing the behaviour of their subordinates, in an endeavour to unleash their subordinates to achieve their perceived potential.

The overall category of leader centred strategies is comprised of two separate sub-strategies – cognitive processes and accomplishment strategies. These strategies are depicted in Figure 2 below.

A leader's ability to modify their behaviour relies on a number of factors, primarily their level of awareness of their influence on subordinates' behaviours and their preparedness to make changes to their own behaviours. For example, Vera is prepared to take responsibility of her own actions: "… I'm not going to be able to change people. I might be able to change myself to understand how I'm interacting, if I can do it better somewhere else" (Kriflik, 2002:88). When the influence of leader behaviour on subordinate behaviour is perceived to be positive, a leader is more likely to attempt to maintain or reinforce their behaviour. In contrast, when the influence of leader behaviour on

subordinate behaviour is perceived to be detrimental, a leader is more likely to attempt to cease or modify their behaviour. Both of these actions are likely to result in a subsequent modification in the subordinate's behaviour and hence a change in their perception of the extent to which they are moving towards the achievement of their potential.

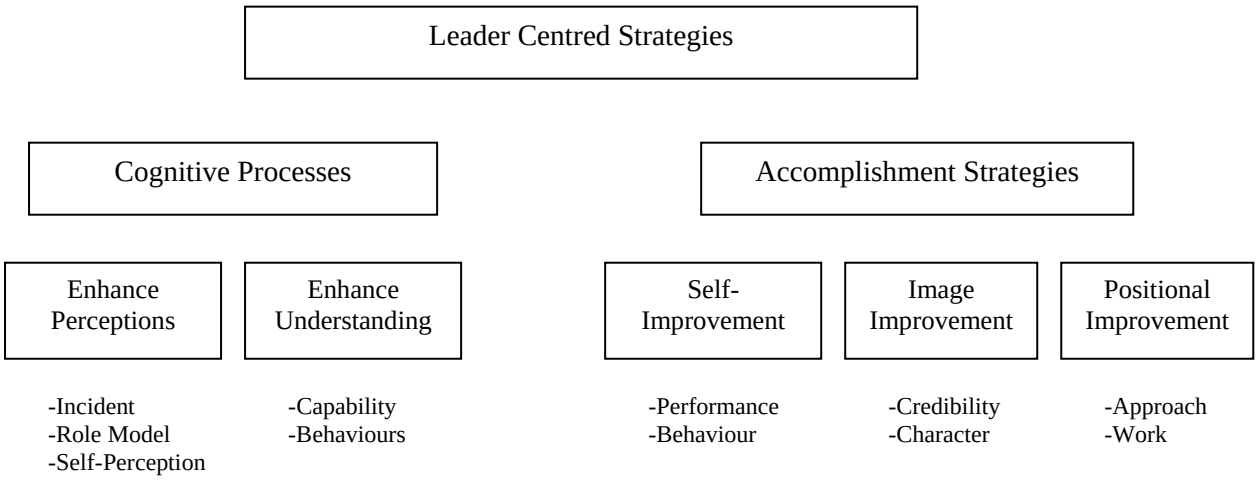

Figure 2 Leader Centred Strategies

The concepts shown in Figure 2 are those that emerged from the Grounded Theory study. The authors believe that many more such concepts constitute the full complement of leader centred strategies that may be utilised by a supervisor engaged in the leadership process.

The key aspect of the leader centred strategies is that they are comprised of the two sub-strategies, cognitive processes and accomplishment strategies. The findings indicate that it is unlikely for a leader to engage in accomplishment strategies if they have not succumbed to cognitive processes.

Cognitive processes are the thought processes of a supervisor (in a leadership role) whereby that supervisor is either deliberately or inadvertently enhancing their perceptions of incidents around them, role modelling by others, or their own attitudes and behaviours. This concept refers to the level of awareness of a supervisor of things happening around them. An example is Lewis (a supervisor as well as a subordinate) who's level of awareness had diminished to the point where he had to deal with the consequence: "It was frustration and it was late at night and we were under a lot of pressure to get an answer out. It was frustration that, I guess, I'd taken my eye off the ball in terms of this person's

performance and I'd got back these results which weren't correct in some way and that made us all look bad. So I guess I'm blaming myself for it …" (Kriflik, 2002:108). Cognitive processes also include the enhancement of understanding, either deliberate or inadvertent, that then comes from such enhanced awareness.

This sub-strategy is the key to enabling a change to take place. Without the first step of recognising the existence of some issue, it is highly unlikely that a supervisor can resolve such issues.

The extant literature cites many examples of the inability of supervisors or managers to be aware of their own behaviours, and the consequences of this in their workplace. For example, Mendleson (1998:18) refers to a manager (Terry Martin) as "suddenly" realising that she was behaving in an arrogant fashion. Green et al. (1992) has studied incompetent managers (bosses), and how employees adapt to the situation through a combination of acceptance of this incompetence, and self-change. Green et al. (1992) refer to the identification of specific incompetencies in order to work around these. The need for subordinates to *work around* their supervisor's incompetence highlights a significant consequence of supervisors' inability to be self-aware.

The easy part of the self-change process seems to be the *accomplishment strategies* that bring about changes to a supervisor's performance and behaviours, the perception they believe others have of them (eg credibility, character), and how they apply themselves to their work. The reason this is the easy part is that such strategies are not utilised until a supervisor, first, is aware of the issues, and second, understands the issues sufficiently to acknowledge their own part in allowing these to arise in the first place. The acknowledgement is the hard part. This level of understanding may be a factor in the process for selecting the specific accomplishment strategies. To attain this level of understanding of an issue it is likely that the cognitive process includes the evaluation of scenarios that may resolve the issue. One of the authors is currently conducting research which hopes to provide better understanding of how such choices are made by supervisors. This is in the context of the study of how leaders have learnt their leadership competencies.

Other literature supports the notion of self-awareness being a pre-requisite to adopting any self-change strategy. Green et al. (1992) says about self-change that change is not possible unless the person has “fully accepted the situation”. This is consistent with the findings of this present study which has identified the stages of a supervisor’s cognitive processing which leads to the adoption of a leader centred strategy. This process includes the stages of initial perception, being concerned about an issue, and taking responsibility for the issue. Without these steps it seems unlikely that supervisors will consider any self-change strategy.

The awareness of an issue thus could be considered to be a threshold step in the process of adopting self-change strategies. Below this level of awareness no change is possible. Above this level of awareness, processes have started and may lead to self-change strategies.

The point of interest is now: can we move people (supervisors) to and beyond this threshold? The answer seems to be a clear ‘yes’. Much work is needed to understand the issues of learning, specifically, leadership competencies in the context of the supervision process. Qualitative research is currently under way to study the factors that enable leadership competencies to be learnt and to be adapted to industries or circumstances significantly different to those where the learning took place.

Powell et al. (2001) studied self-change in prisons as part of the Cognitive Self-Change program established in 1986. The self-change program includes participants providing “cognitive check-in reports” and “thinking reports” which are designed to make prisoners reflect on thoughts or feelings regarding a situation and how that thinking may lead to criminal or hurtful behaviour (Powell et al., 2001). This concept coincides with both the concept of cognitive processes, as defined in this study (Kriflik, 2002:155-162) and with the concept of leader actioning (Kriflik, 2002:83-88).

The important question that still remains to be addressed is that of learning this process. Can we learn to operate at or above the threshold of awareness and so develop and strengthen the ability to self-change. Goldberg (2002) believes we can, and has developed ten principles deemed essential for successful self-change. A key principle is that of breaking down behaviours into small, separate components in order to fully understand each (Goldberg, 2002). This is consistent with the awareness

process. By breaking down behaviours into parts, that level of awareness may be reached which enables a person to learn to operate well above the threshold. As this study has found, operating above this awareness threshold is likely to lead to self-change strategies. For supervisors, self-change can be a very successful strategy, by minimising subordinates' attainment deficit, to achieve enhanced performance of these subordinates.

Self-change strategies have a higher rate of success in influencing positive change in subordinates than do strategies focussed on the subordinate themselves or the work environment (Kriflik, 2002; 2004). Kriflik (2002:157) also highlights the ability to learn leadership behaviours from sources such as role models. For example, Megan likes to emulate behaviours she perceives as desirable and also to learn from other behaviours she perceives as less successful. Her observation of her supervisors' behaviours enhances her awareness of the difference between desirable and undesirable leader behaviour.

> *" … when I see things with people that I really respect a lot with respect to how they get their job done, and some of the leadership roles where they do things that I think 'that's a trap that you shouldn't fall into', so I do often look at [their behaviour]".*

Data presently being analysed from a new study of leadership competency development already shows more evidence of supervisors learning leadership competencies. The study involves asking supervisors where and when they believed they first learnt skills that contributed to current competencies, and it is clear that some people have made the cognitive connections and are deliberate about picking up skills. One participant refers to adding tools to her tool box as she goes along. This coincides with the finding of the present study and reinforces one author's view that this is a gap in literature which, when filled, has the potential to contribute significantly to the understanding of how leaders can learn to change.

Conclusion

This paper has used the setting of a large Australian public sector bureaucracy to present a conceptually ordered model of how leaders can learn to change themselves in order to influence the behaviour of their subordinates. Within large bureaucracies, subordinates often feel constrained in the

extent to which they can control their own destiny with regard to reaching their potential. They often rely on the behaviour of their leaders to unleash their own behavioural ability to achieve their potential within the organisation.

The emphasis in this paper on 'cognitive processes' supports the importance of the role of human cognitions in social learning theory. However, the model stresses the significant link between *perceptions* and *understanding* prior to the critical link to behaviour. 'Enhancing understanding' stresses the importance of leaders gaining a more intense knowledge and insight into the processes by means of which their behaviour impacts on subordinates. Without this understanding leaders cannot optimally implement 'accomplishment strategies' to change their own behaviour.

The model presented in this paper suggests that the most important aspect of leader self-change is that an "awakening" of the awareness process can be brought about by coaching. Self-perception, therefore, can be learnt, and so can lead to deliberate self-change strategies by supervisors.

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