The Environment. You! Me?: a leadership theory

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Abstract

This paper refers to the concept of Minimising Attainment Deficit (MAD). This is a leadership process whereby leaders help workers fulfil their expectations of achieving their potential in their work. A qualitative approach to the collection and analysis of data was adopted through the use of orthodox grounded theory. Its aim was to generate rather than to test theory. This research has contributed knowledge relevant to practitioners in the area of leadership by presenting this concept as a processual theory, along with three sets of strategies employed by supervisors(leaders). These strategies aim to help subordinates(followers) minimise the gap between the level at which they are actually achieving in their job and the potential at which they perceive they could be achieving. These strategies focus on the work environment, the subordinate, and the leader. Modifying the environment was found to be the most popular choice of strategy for supervisors when attempting to make changes to accommodate subordinate needs. The research identifies this approach as the least effective in achieving expected change. The second choice of strategy focused on the subordinate ('You' from the supervisor's point of view). The study has shown that such a focus was more successful than a focus on the environment. The third choice of strategy was a focus on the supervisor ('Me' from the supervisor's point of view). From a subordinate's point of view this was the most successful strategy for achieving desired change.

Keywords

Leadership, Grounded Theory, Workplace Relations, Productivity, Subordinate Behaviour, Self-change

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Introduction

The *purpose* of the research presented in this paper is to generate a theory of the leadership process within a particular setting. The purpose of this paper is to expound on a specific aspect of the findings. 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.

Methodology

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 researcher 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 necessity to situate processual leadership research within specific institutional and situational contexts has recently been expounded more emphatically in the literature (Bryman et al, 1996; Biggart and Hamilton, 1987; Alvesson, 1996). The significance of this present study is that it does not attempt to "marginalise contextual issues" (Bryman et al, 1996a:850). On the contrary, contextual issues are elevated to centre stage. Previous grounded theory studies have also been undertaken in specific institutional or sectoral environments involving large and complex governmental or public sector institutions (Parry, 1997; Brooks, 1998; Irurita, 1990). Previous grounded theories of large, complex governmental institutions have been performed within an environment of significant change. Hence, the core variables discovered have reflected this situation, such as "enhancing adaptability" in local government (Parry, 1997), "optimising" in nursing (Irurita, 1990, 1992), and "weighing up change" in local government (Brooks, 1998). The relatively stable change environment is compounded in this present study by its location within a dominant engineering institutional culture. The conforming and hierarchical nature of this type of work within a relatively stable change environment has placed less emphasis on the charismatic, visionary or transformational aspects of leadership. It is within this particular configuration of contextual variables (that have been less extensively subjected to grounded theory investigations) that this present study finds much of its significance. The significance of the study is enhanced, too, because it expounds the viewpoint of 'subordinates' within AGRO, many 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. 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.

Employing the process of Minimising Attainment Deficit enables supervisors to gain significant benefits. Such benefits include:

▪ enhanced team involvement.
▪ cooperative behaviour.
▪ trust and respect of supervisor.
▪ accepting the inevitable (Kriflik, 2002:58).

The process of Minimising Attainment Deficit 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.
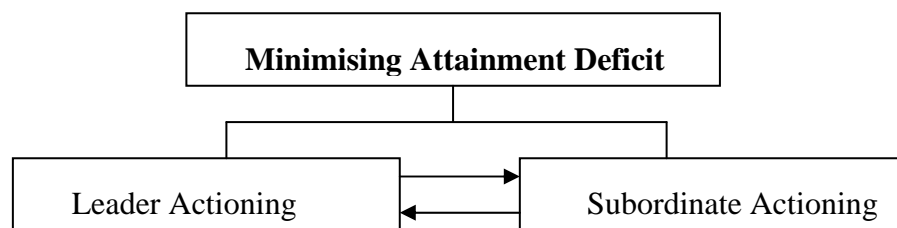

Figure 1:
Leadership Process: Core and Sub-Core Categories

A significant outcome of this research is the cyclic nature of the leadership process, previously absent from the leadership literature, and the three types of strategies employed by supervisors when they attempt to minimise their subordinates' Attainment Deficit (Kriflik, 2002). This paper will only focus on aspects of Leader Actioning, specifically the leader focused strategies.

An unexpected outcome from this study has been the realisation that these three sets of leader strategies have different levels of success, as reported by subordinates, in their attempt to minimise Attainment Deficit. The leader strategies, specifically, are:

▪ a focus on the subordinate to provide support and development.
▪ a focus on the work environment to reduce communication barriers, to plan work, and to create a conducive work atmosphere.
▪ a focus by the supervisor (as a leader) on him/herself by actively enhancing their own understanding of interactions with subordinates, and deliberately choosing self-centred strategies which are perceived to minimise the subordinates' Attainment Deficit (Kriflik, 2002:92).

The latter of these three strategies embodies the concept of 'self-change'. Self-change is where a person perceives that changing their own approach in certain circumstances is the most successful means of remedying an undesirable situation (Mendleson, 1998). For example, Vera (an engineer who is a supervisor as well as a subordinate) thought that "perhaps I wasn't giving the best message but I wasn't aware of how to do it" (Kriflik, 2002:157). This is Vera's acknowledgement of her own short comings; she tried different approaches hoping to succeed. Vera is prepared, however, 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). A further example is Megan (a section manager who is a supervisor as well as a subordinate) who admits that she is not confident at giving feedback to her subordinates regarding their behaviours and states that if "they don't find me credible then I will change my level of performance to try to change that perception" (Kriflik, 2002:159), and "when I do it badly I do tend to think long and hard about how I could have done it differently" (Kriflik, 2002:160). Lewis (a section manager who is a supervisor as well as a subordinate) also provides an example of self-awareness leading to self-change. "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). A key to a supervisor's attempt at self-change is acknowledging that "Changing yourself is not a complete strategy either because you cannot change unless you have fully accepted the situation" (Green et al., 1992:28).

Many examples emerged in this study where leaders chose one or a combination of the three strategies. Many subordinates who reported these strategy choices also reported their perceptions of the level of success of such strategies. For example, Vera is critical of a number of her supervisors: "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), suggesting no success. Phil shows his approval of his supervisor's leader strategy choices. "It makes me go back to the men and tell them positive things about our management" (Kriflik, 2002:77). Phil also says of his supervisor "… I know that he is a bloke who would not lie to you" (Kriflik, 2002:55). Phil says of a senior manager "I think [Harry] has improved 100% from the opinion I had 4 years ago, 5 years ago, he seems to be more hands on now, he attends meetings, he tells the delegates, at a level anyway, he won't tell the whole workforce; maybe he should in the future, tell them what he's actually doing, but he's telling us that he wants to fight, that he wants us to be competitive whereas in the past we never seen him, once every blue moon or it might have been a death or something like that, here comes this; you know, is there a [Harry]? Is he just a figment of our imagination? But he's actually coming out on job sites now, there is a face to this man, and he's doing a lot of things to help us remain competitive" (Kriflik, 2002:101). Phil is reporting a perceived high level of success of some supervisors' leader strategies.

From such reports it emerged that of the three categories of strategies subordinates found the leader focused strategies most desirable and the environment focused strategies least desirable. Subordinate focused strategies fell somewhere in between these in their level of desirability.

The environment focused strategies were perceived to be feeble attempts by leaders to alter aspects of workplace circumstances so as to achieve a reduction in their

Attainment Deficit. Such aspects included access to the leader and to information; clearer directions, deadlines and goals; and a positive and supportive atmosphere.

The subordinate focused strategies were perceived by subordinates to be demonstrating a caring for, or valuing of, them in the workplace. Such strategies included an evaluation by the leader of the subordinate's needs, situation, and 'state of being' (Kriflik, 2002:95). State-of-being is the measure of self-perception by the subordinate of their own Attainment Deficit. The monitoring of this by a supervisor is considered to be an entry-level strategy (Kriflik, 2002:93). These strategies may also include attempts by leaders to develop subordinates through various means, such as training, mentoring or experience and participation; or may include only attempts by the leader to provide help and guidance or affirmation of their effort. The strategies which focus on subordinates are perceived to be fairly successful at minimising subordinates' Attainment Deficit.

The strategies which focus on the leaders themselves included a deliberate intention by the leaders to be aware of and to understand situations and circumstances, followed by deliberate strategies to modify their own behaviour or approach, or other people's perception of this, in order to accomplish a positive change in their interactions with subordinates.

Leader focused strategies include the cognitive processes of enhancing perceptions and enhancing understanding, and the accomplishment strategies of self improvement, image improvement, and positional improvement (Kriflik, 2002:154). Cognitive processes are those that are intended to increase a supervisor's cognition of the influence of their own behaviours and the behaviours of their subordinates. Accomplishment strategies are those that are intended by a supervisor to accomplish a change in their own behaviour so as to improve the perception of this behaviour by subordinates.

Implications

Leader Actioning is a sequence of cognitive processes which takes place as a result of a leader's perception of subordinate behaviours and it links these to the adoption of leader strategies. If a supervisor is not aware of subordinate behaviour no strategies will be adopted. The type of leaders who are most likely to adopt relevant strategies are those who display high levels of perception of subordinate behaviours, high levels of concern for subordinates, and high levels of problem internalisation (Kriflik, 2002:85). Such leaders are those who are most likely to recognise the existence of attainment deficits in their subordinates, and who are most likely, in turn, to employ the leader strategising process with the objective of minimising such attainment deficits. Of this group of leaders only some will focus on themselves and choose leader focused strategies. Such strategies may be integrated with subordinate focused and environment focused strategies.

These findings have implications for further research. Some of the evidence presented in this paper is tenuous in relation to this aspect of the findings and further research into this area of interest is planned. If further findings support the theory put forward in this paper there are clear implications for practitioners. Human Resource Development could easily incorporate the learnings derived from these findings and these may enhance the leadership abilities of supervisors and managers.

Conclusion

This paper has presented research into a grounded theory of the leadership process in a large government bureaucracy where the main concern of the participants was to minimise the gap between the perceptions of their present work reality and their potential. This was resolved through the core variable and basic social process of Minimising Attainment Deficit and achieved through the adoption of strategies by the leader.

Even in this early stage of theory building it is evident from this study that those leaders who accept responsibility for a situation and who attempt to resolve issues by modifying their own behaviour are far more successful at reducing their subordinates' Attainment Deficit, and so enhancing organisational performance.

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