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# A grounded theory of the leadership process in a large government bureaucracy

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a theory of the leadership process within the particular substantive setting of a large government bureaucracy. The study organisation (labelled AGRO) possesses a dominant engineering culture and has a history characterised by non-tumultuous change. The research methodology of orthodox grounded theory was employed. The main concern of the participants was found to be a desire to close the gap between their current work reality and that level they perceived themselves to be capable of achieving. This was resolved through the basic social process of Minimising Attainment Deficit. Leadership aspects of charisma and vision were not evident in this substantive setting.

## **Keywords**

grounded theory, leadership, bureaucracy, process

## **Disciplines**

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This paper presents a theory of the leadership process within the particular substantive setting of a large government bureaucracy. The study organisation (labelled AGRO) possesses a dominant engineering culture and has a history characterised by non- tumultuous change. The research methodology of orthodox grounded theory was employed. The main concern of the participants was found to be a desire to close the gap between their current work reality and that level they perceived themselves to be capable of achieving. This was resolved through the basic social process of Minimising Attainment Deficit. Leadership aspects of charisma and vision were not evident in this substantive setting.

# A Grounded Theory of the Leadership Process in a Large Government Bureaucracy

## Introduction

The *purpose* of the research presented in this paper is to generate a theory of the leadership process within a particular substantive setting. The substantive setting chosen is that of a government department (pseudonym AGRO) which manages the traffic and road system in a state of 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 dominant 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.

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 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.

This present research claims *significance* in two main areas: research methodology and contextual sensitivity. 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). In this respect, this present study does not appear to be especially significant. However, a defining characteristic of this present study is its location within a relatively stable change environment. 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, and 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.

## **Background to AGRO**

Organisational size and complexity. AGRO is an extremely complex organisation with regard to a number of factors, such as size, functions, dispersion and hierarchy. It maintains over 20,000 kilometres of roads, over 4,000 bridges, ferries, and countless traffic lights, roundabouts, and signs. It licences over 4 million drivers and registers their vehicles. AGRO employs over 6,000 full time staff spread throughout offices in more than 200 locations in its state, 128 of which provide licence and registration services. There are ten levels in the AGRO hierarchy from the CEO down to the roadwork labourer. It has a hierarchy structured according to its business functions (road safety, road network, network performance), creating very complicated channels of communication for the service delivery staff of over 4,000 employees. As well as being structured according to business functions, AGRO is divided into geographical districts which contain workers from both the client and service delivery functions. The complexity of AGRO is exacerbated by the utilisation of the funder/provider model to separate clients with fund allocations from the providers of their services. In each district there are further sub-structures that provide a number of service delivery depots spread throughout the district.

Public sector organization. AGRO is a typical government department established to provide services to the public, not to make a profit. It has, in its portfolio, a community service obligation to ensure access to its services even for members of the public living in remote areas of its state. These services include the provision of some regional roads and bridges, facilities for licensing transactions, and road safety benefits, etc. A key responsibility for AGRO is the management of public assets. To help provide and maintain such assets, funds are budgeted for their provision, for safety enhancements, and for their repair. The actual work to provide or maintain this asset is carried out either by AGRO's own workers or under a contract with an external supplier.

Dominant engineering culture. A considerable portion of AGRO business relates to engineering functions associated with the construction and maintenance of the road network and associated facilities. An individual's occupation in large part determines one's view of the world (Bensman and Lilienfeld, 1973). There is a different reality to which different occupations respond with different ways of perceiving that reality (Bensman and Lilienfeld, 1973:319).

The internal dynamics and the social administrative arrangements of engineering contain cultural scripts that are integral to occupational worldview (Vaughan, 1996:204). Engineering is a bureaucratic profession (Perrucci, 1970) and engineering workplaces are organised by the principles of capitalism and bureaucratic hierarchy. Engineers' "place" in the hierarchical system is clear. The engineering worldview includes a preoccupation with 1) cost and efficiency, 2) conformity to rules and hierarchical authority, and 3) production goals (Vaughan, 1996:205). Both "engineering as a profession" and "bureaucracy" are guided by universal rules intended to give order, predictability and certainty (Heimer, 1984). Both cultivate respect for the chain of command and a sense of limited responsibility by virtue of functional specialisation (Merton, 1947). Bureaucratic rules and lines of administrative authority in the complex organisations for which engineers work, are taken for granted in the engineering worldview. Discipline and conformity are fundamental to success.

Specialisation (Perrucci, 1970:301) and limited mobility (Heimer, 1984) amongst engineers dictate that possible career advancement consists mainly of movement into management positions in the same organisation (Vaughan, 1996:205). Engineering loyalty, job satisfaction and identity come from the relationship with the employer, not from the profession. Engineers adopt the belief system of the organisations that employ them. Engineers are used to and expect working conditions created by the upper echelon and that include production pressure, cost cutting, limited resources, and compromises (Thomas, 1993:81). Their support for the hierarchical arrangements of bureaucracy is borne out by their own aspirations toward upward mobility via the management track (Zussman, 1971:155). To succeed as an engineer is to conform both to bureaucratic procedural mandates, chain

of command, and production goals, and to the rules for technical decision-making learned while training for the engineering profession (Vaughan, 1996:208). Advancement through the hierarchy is on the basis of examination and merit ratings which are presumably objective and impersonal (Bensman and Lilienfeld, 1973:291). Long-term career interests tie engineers to the organisation creating a stake in the maintenance of the industrial order and in the rules of the game on which the expectation of advancement is based (Zussman, 1971:230).

Absence of tumultuous change. Compared with many other organisations in both the public and private sectors, AGRO has not experienced many episodes of tumultuous change. Two change incidents in AGRO's history do, however, stand out: the formation of AGRO in the 1980s from the merger of two previously separate organisations and the contracting out of maintenance contracts. In contrast with the types of transformational change experienced by employees and managers in other public organisations and in other sectors of the economy, however, AGRO has experienced relatively stable conditions for long periods of time.

## **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.

However, the objective of this research is not the capturing of a comprehensive description but rather the building of a theory to conceptualise the leadership process inherent within a certain contextual environment. However, the literature is still sparse regarding the determination of theory from qualitative studies to explain the leadership processes at work. However, of the qualitative methodologies available to researchers, grounded theory is the most concerned with moving past the description of phenomena and onto theory generation.

The Glaserian, or orthodox, version of grounded theory is well suited to the study of complex entities because of its ability to produce a multifaceted account of organisational action in context (Locke, 2001:95). 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 15 participants were personally interviewed, following the principles of theoretical sampling, before the model was considered to be saturated.

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. Subordinates perceive a leader as somebody who is able to interact with them in order to liberate, unleash, and facilitate their movement towards achievement of their goals and full potential. This main concern is resolved by leaders and subordinates acting together to minimise their 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.

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 leaders and subordinates impact one another in a continuous cycle of actions and consequences.

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

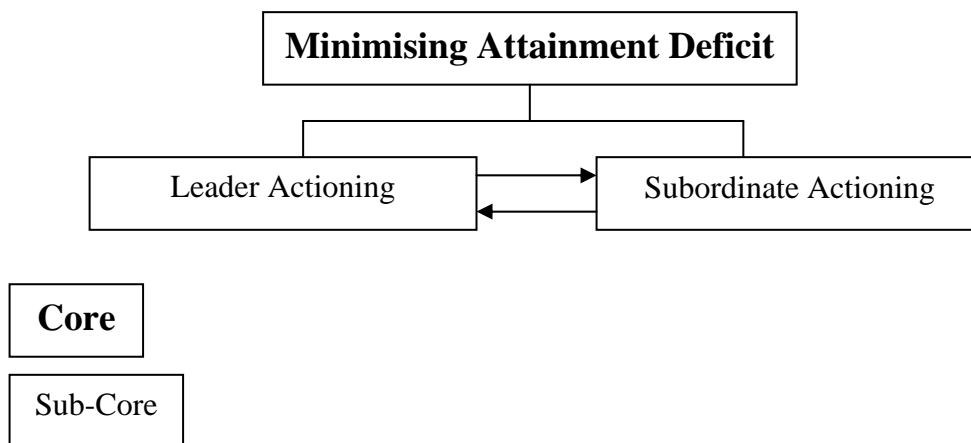


Figure 1: Leadership Process: Core and Sub-Core Categories

### Subordinate Actioning

Subordinates act within an organisational environment which they perceive as largely created by the actions and strategies of organisational leaders. Within this context subordinates seek to maximise their potential. *Subordinate actioning* is composed of three linked phases – perceptioning, emotioning and behaviouring.

When there is a shortfall between the potential perceived by a subordinate and their present reality in their work, that subordinate is *limited*. When there is little or no shortfall between the potential perceived by a subordinate and the present reality in their work, that subordinate is *unleashed*. When the gap between potential and present reality is small this condition can lead to a positive attitude, but when this gap is large it usually leads to a negative attitude. This attitude which results from the perceived discrepancy (gap) between these two variables manifests itself in emotional reactions on the part of organisational subordinates.

*Emotions* are an integral part of the behaviour formulation process, linking subordinate perceptions with subordinate behaviours. Positive emotional reactions are more likely to be the consequence of a subordinate perceptioning process which results in a small attainment deficit. Examples of positive emotional reactions that emerged from the data include amazement, inspiration, excitement, happiness, and respect. On the other hand, negative emotional reactions are more likely to be the consequence of a subordinate perceptioning process which results in a large attainment deficit. Examples of negative emotional reactions follow that emerged from the data include anger, frustration, disillusionment, uncertainty, and disappointment.

Two major moderating variables emerged from the study, affecting the relationship between subordinate perceptioning and subordinate emotioning. These have been labeled deficit reduction and cognitive blocking. These variables may explain why some workers appear to be avoiding negative emotional reactions even though they perceive themselves to be experiencing a large attainment deficit, or they hold negative perceptions about leader actions. *Deficit reduction* relates to a subordinate's perception of the rate of progress being made in the direction of reducing their attainment deficit, rather than an emphasis on the absolute size of attainment deficit. Thus, if a subordinate perceives that the rate of progress being made in reducing their attainment deficit is adequate, this can act as a significant emotional moderator, even though the absolute gap in their attainment deficit is perceived to be large. *Cognitive blocking* is a distancing strategy employed by subordinates to protect their emotions from the hurt of negative perceptions. Such blocking strategies are often related to a learning process resulting from previous experience.

*Subordinate behaviouring* is the process by means of which subordinates act out the consequences of the previous emotioning process. Subordinate behaviours possess a number of properties which emerged from the study. Behaviours can be *overt* or *covert*. They can also be *spontaneous* (such as an outburst of anger) or *deliberate* (such as an act of sabotage). Deliberate behaviours involve the conscious formulation of a response act (a plan) followed by the implementation of this plan.

Two broad subcategories of subordinate behaviours emerged from the study – beneficial and detrimental behaviours. *Beneficial behaviour* is defined as a pattern of behaviour that is most conducive to the achievement of the organisation's desired outcomes. A subordinate who exhibits beneficial behaviour usually has a desire to be helpful to their leader's efforts and displays a *willingness to go the extra mile*. Such behaviour is invariably the result of positive emotions displayed by unleashed subordinates with a small or zero perception of their attainment deficit. *Detrimental behaviour*, on the other hand, is defined as a pattern of behaviour that frustrates the achievement of the organisation's desired outcomes. A subordinate who exhibits detrimental behaviour usually avoids being helpful to their leaders (and often also to co-workers and customers) and displays a foot-dragging attitude of *only working to minimal requirements*. Such behaviour invariably results from negative emotions displayed by *limited* subordinates with a perception of significant attainment deficit.

The use of *behavioural blocking* by subordinates emerged from the study as a major moderating variable affecting the relationship between subordinate emotioning and subordinate behaviouring. Behavioural blocking is a strategy employed by subordinates to insulate their behaviour from the adverse influence of negative emotions. The presence of behavioural blocking may explain why some workers exhibit desirable behaviour even though they experience negative emotions resulting from the perception of a large attainment deficit.

*Workplace consequences* are those measurable occurrences that result from the subordinate behaviouring process. They occur at a strategic and aggregate level and significantly impact on overall organisational performance. Five categories of workplace consequences emerged from the data – productivity, profitability, worker retention, worker attendance, and quality.

### **Leader Actioning**

*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 a certain set of leader strategies. Leader Actioning is composed of four linked phases – perceptioning, concerning, probleming and strategising.

Leaders have varying degrees of perception, concern for others, problem internalisation and strategy adoption, as shown in Figure 2 below. Although these variables are depicted in dichotomous terms for convenience in the diagram, it is more appropriate to envisage them as continuums. For example, different leaders have varying degrees of perception of subordinate behaviour, varying degrees of concern for others, and so on.



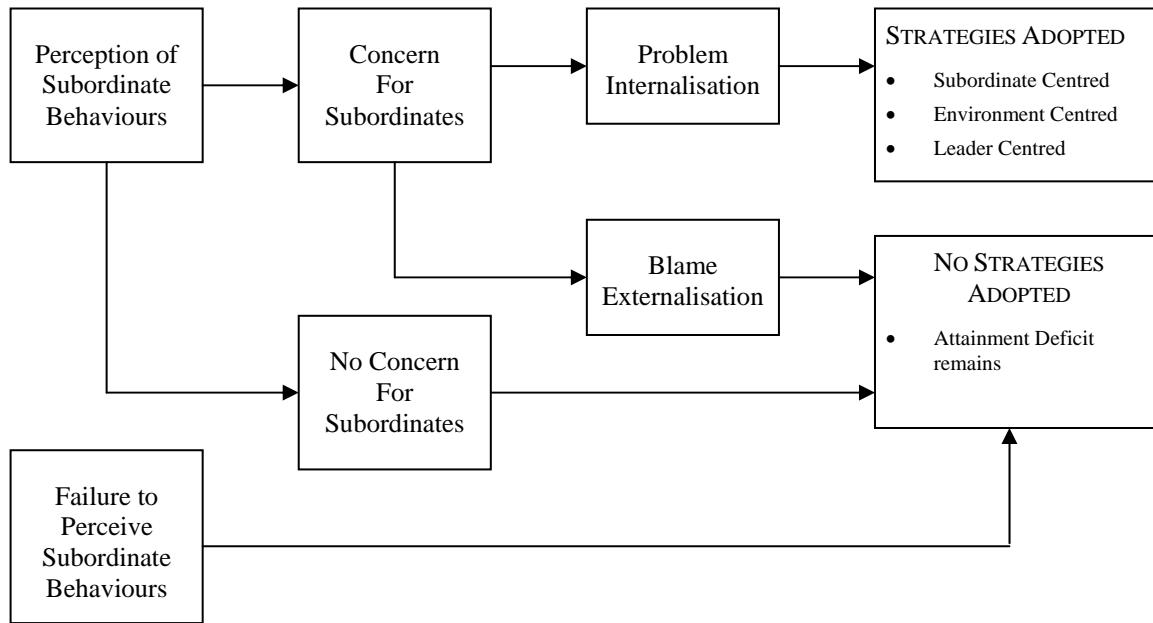


Figure 2: *Leader Perceptioning, Concerning, Probleming and Strategising*

*Leader perceptioning* refers to the extent that leaders are aware of the actions and behaviours of their subordinates. Leaders either fail to perceive subordinate behaviours, and so have a greater tendency not to adopt appropriate strategies, or else do perceive subordinate behaviours and then proceed to process what they perceive.

*Leader concerning* refers to the extent that leaders show concern for the welfare of their subordinates. Leaders either display no concern for their subordinates, and so have a greater tendency not to adopt appropriate strategies, or else do have concern for their subordinates and then proceed to act on that concern.

*Leader probleming* refers to the extent that leaders adopt a tendency to internalise subordinate and workplace problems. Leaders either have a tendency to blame external circumstances for problems, and so display a greater tendency not to adopt appropriate strategies, or else tend to internalise problems as issues over which they can exert some influence or control, and then proceed to act on that internalisation.

*Leader strategising* refers to the extent that leaders devise and implement appropriate strategies in response to subordinate and workplace problems. The type of leaders 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. 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.

Leader strategies are of three broad types, those that focus either on the subordinate, on the wider environment, or on the leaders themselves. Subordinate Centred Strategies focus on the subordinates themselves to satisfy their needs and expectations and so facilitate optimal work performance. Environment Centred Strategies focus on the work environment to ensure it remains conducive to subordinates performing at their best. Leader Centred Strategies focus on the leaders themselves to enhance the work situation through their own self-improvement.

The leadership process continues indefinitely with actions and consequences compounding in either a *virtuous* or a *vicious* manner, depending upon the style of leader actioning. The relationship between the stages and phases of the Minimising Attainment Deficit process is shown in Figure 3 below.

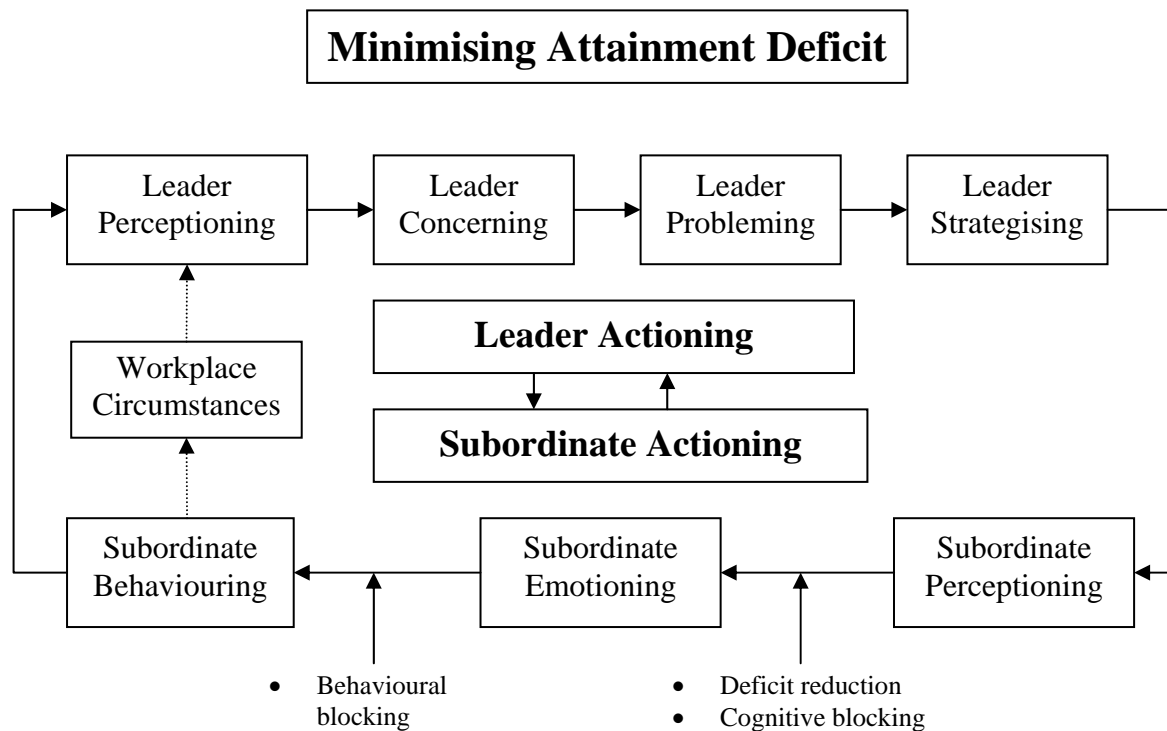


Figure 3: *Minimising Attainment Deficit – the Basic Social Process*

### Conclusion

This paper has presented research into a grounded theory of the leadership process in a large government bureaucracy that has experienced an absence of tumultuous change. 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. Participants stressed the necessity for career advancement within a hierarchical and conforming environment, placing less emphasis on charismatic or visionary leadership aspects.

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