Minimising attainment deficit: A leadership process theory

George K. Kriflik
University of Wollongong, kriflik@hotmail.com

Robert Jones
University of Wollongong

Publication Details
This conference paper was originally published as Kriflik, G and Jones, R, Minimising attainment deficit: A leadership process theory, in Proceedings of the 15th ANZAM Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 2001.
Minimising attainment deficit: A leadership process theory

Abstract
Leadership as a process was found by RTA workers to fulfill their need for attaining their potential in their jobs. This article presents an overview of this substantive theory which emerged during a Grounded Theory study. Minimising Attainment Deficit, the process, comprises a number of Leader Strategies which aim to modify workplace conditions and so alter workers’ behaviours. The fundamental premise of this theory is the workers’ perceptions of their own potential and their perception of what they are currently achieving, and that any shortfall in achievement results in an Attainment Deficit. Minimising Attainment Deficit Unleashes workers to achieve higher productivity whereas failing to minimise Attainment Deficit Limits workers and results in low productivity.

Keywords
leadership, grounded theory

Disciplines
Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details
This conference paper was originally published as Kriflik, G and Jones, R, Minimising attainment deficit: A leadership process theory, in Proceedings of the 15th ANZAM Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 2001.

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/346
Minimising attainment deficit: A leadership process theory

George Kriflik and Robert Jones

Department of Management,
University of Wollongong,
NSW 2522, Australia

Address for correspondence:
George Kriflik
Department of Management,
University of Wollongong.
Phone: 612 42682135
Email: george_kriflik@uow.edu.au

Presented at ANZAM Conference
Auckland, New Zealand
5 December 2001

Abstract:
Leadership as a process was found by RTA workers to fulfill their need for attaining their potential in their jobs. This article presents an overview of this substantive theory which emerged during a Grounded Theory study. Minimising Attainment Deficit, the process, comprises a number of Leader Strategies which aim to modify workplace conditions and so alter workers’ behaviours. The fundamental premise of this theory is the workers’ perceptions of their own potential and their perception of what they are currently achieving, and that any shortfall in achievement results in an Attainment Deficit. Minimising Attainment Deficit Unleashes workers to achieve higher productivity whereas failing to minimise Attainment Deficit Limits workers and results in low productivity.

Introduction:
Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to advance a process theory of what constitutes optimal leadership from the perspective of subordinates (followers) within a traditional work environment. It takes its inspiration from the work of Parry (1998) who argues that leadership research has been traditionally dominated by a strong psychological orientation. Parry argues that rather than examining leadership through the study of the person of the leader, it should instead be regarded as essentially a social process. Leadership should be conceived as one of Glaser’s basic social processes (1978).

Change is an essential aspect of the process of leadership. Leadership involves a transformation in the views, beliefs, attitudes and motivations of followers, and as such is essentially a social influence process. There exists a persuasive argument that sociological and anthropological qualitative research methods should at least supplement quantitative psychological methods because of their capacity to “get at processes in social life” (Parry 1998, p 87).
Context of Study

This substantive study is taking place in a government authority that is responsible for main roads in NSW, as well as for the provision of registration and licensing for drivers. It also provides the Vehicle Regulations function in NSW. While the study is limited to a region with less than 1000 employees, a common context of change exists for all of the Roads and Traffic Authority’s (RTA) 6400 employees.

The RTA has been undergoing change throughout the 1990s, with four structural reviews of varying degree taking place since 1992 and four different Chief Executives over the same period. These changes represent a number of people’s different approaches to managing such a large government organisation and provides much opportunity for people to be disaffected. It also has provided opportunities for true leaders to emerge and to maintain the RTA’s performance through their endless effort of Minimising Attainment Deficit.

The RTA is a traditional, hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation with a very strong engineer domination of middle management. This domination, coupled with a public sector mind set, makes the RTA a conservative, rule driven organisation which provides good contextual conditions for effective leadership to take place.

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this research is grounded theory. This is an inductive method of generating new theory from data through the simultaneous collection, coding and analysis of data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998).

Grounded theory was chosen as the research methodology because it permits the bringing of new theorising, insights and modifications to existing mature theoretical frameworks, such as leadership (Locke 2001). Additionally, grounded theory possesses two further advantages from the point of view of this paper’s purpose. Firstly, it adapts well to capturing complexities of the context in which the action and process unfolds, enabling researchers to better understand all that may be involved in a particular substantive issue. Secondly, it generates theoretical accounts that conform closely to the situations that participants find themselves in, thus allowing them to gain a perspective on their own work situation and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Locke 2001, p95).

Data for the study has been collected through three basic methods: personal interviews with a range of respondents from within the RTA, participant observation by one of the authors in the role of a manager and employee within the RTA, and examination and analysis of a wide variety of organisational and other documentation.

The research for this paper is still ongoing. The purpose of the paper at this stage is to present the embryonic model that has emerged from the initial interviews. Nine respondents from various levels throughout the hierarchy were selectively sampled (Schatzman and Strauss 1973) for in-depth interviews. Glaser (1978) contends that most of the important categories in a study will usually have emerged within the first 4-5 interviews. This was certainly the case in this study. The researcher observed a repetition of categories occurring from approximately the fifth interview onwards.

Each respondent was asked to identify and describe a critical incident (Flanagan 1954) which they perceived to epitomise good leadership. However, the basic format of each interview was unstructured. The researcher intervened at various points in each interview to obtain further elaborations of individual points and ideas.

Each interview was transcribed in full and coded onto concept cards (Martin and Turner 1986). Each concept card allowed for the conceptualisation of a definite and bounded theme. With the accumulation of entries on each concept card the researcher was able to formulate definitions, identify categories and sub-categories, and create lists of properties and dimensions within each category.

Memo writing commenced as the interview sequence progressed. These memos were written in a free-flowing manner in order to attempt to pull together the main themes within each category and also to link categories together in the manner of theory building. This is known as theoretical coding.
enabled the researcher to identify an underlying sequence that constitutes the leadership process. This process has been called *Minimising Attainment Deficit*.

At this stage *Minimising Attainment Deficit* still remains a naïve and undeveloped theory. However, the memo-writing sequence has uncovered a range of gaps and questions that need to be addressed. Further theoretical sampling of a more focused nature is now being undertaken to saturate individual categories in the theory in order to achieve a denser and richer account of the leadership process.

**Minimising Attainment Deficit**

The findings of the study have highlighted that, in the RTA, effective leadership is a cyclic process. *Minimising Attainment Deficit*, the process of Facilitative Leader Behaviour, comprises five stages, where each stage consists of processes that are determined by outcomes from the processes in the previous stage. The stages follow the fixed sequence in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 1: Leadership Processes](image)

Conditions are the starting point in this cyclic process because conditions exist when a worker joins the organisation, and they impact on that worker from the outset. These conditions generate an emotional response which manifests itself in Subordinate Behaviours. The Subordinate Behaviours result in Workplace Consequences that are the impact on the organisation’s productivity. It is the Workplace Consequences which usually create the imperative for a leader to adopt Strategies; astute leaders monitor Conditions and Subordinate Behaviours. These Leader Strategies have Consequences that contribute to or modify the original Conditions. This cycle now continues to repeat itself.

The five stages, and their contribution to the stage which follows, are described in more detail below.

**Conditions**

Conditions are the circumstances which exist in the workplace and the particular state-of-being of the workers. Workplace circumstances are predominately contextual conditions and include factors such as the RTA being an engineering organisation, its organisational structure, and legislation and policies which impinge on its operations. The state-of-being of the workers is predominately an intervening condition and its main factors include the Attainment Deficit and the emotions of workers.

Attainment Deficit is the perceived gap between what a worker believes they are capable of achieving in the work environment, and what that worker perceives to be actually achieving. This definition focuses attention on two broad categories of variable:

**POTENTIAL**: a person’s estimation of what they are capable of achieving

**PRESENT REALITY**: a person’s estimation of what they are currently achieving.

When the gap between Potential and Present Reality is small this condition leads to a positive attitude but when this gap is large it leads to a negative attitude.

These Conditions, particularly workers’ Attainment Deficit, impact on Subordinate Behaviours because workers are reacting to either fulfillment, satisfaction, etc., or frustration, disillusionment, and so lack of fulfillment. The Attainment Deficit of workers has its associated emotions and emotions translate into behaviours. Workers’ cognition of the Conditions and their own emotional reactions triggered by
these Conditions leads to the Subordinate Behaviours that either contribute to or hinder organisational outcomes.

The individual Subordinate Behaviours then combine to create a set of Workplace Consequences. This sequence of perceptions and behaviours is represented in Figure 2 below. The Workplace Consequences, and for more astute leaders Subordinate Behaviours, trigger a Leader Response Behaviour which may result in a leader adopting Strategies.

![Figure 2: Subordinate Cognition](image)

Subordinate Status is the state-of-being of a worker and is also a term used for the Leader Strategy of monitoring the subordinate and their Attainment Deficit. In Figure 2 Subordinate Status is the input to Conditions that result from the workers’ perceptions of whether their Present Reality is less than their Potential, or equal to it. This determines the size of any resulting Attainment Deficit. The size of Attainment Deficit, in turn, determines the nature of emotional reactions which result and these manifest themselves as Subordinate Behaviours.

Subordinate Behaviours
Conditions in the workplace trigger emotional reactions in workers. Many workers have automatic response behaviours with little apparent cognitive process due to these emotions. Other workers deliberately formulate their responsive behaviour (a plan) before acting out this plan.

If the workplace conditions have changed due to Limiting these behaviours are an attempt by subordinates to limit their effort so as to reduce the dissonance created by the increased constraints which prevent them from attaining their full potential. Both automatic response and deliberate strategy are Tawdry Behaviour, but one may be more difficult to stem due to its deliberateness. In both cases the Tawdry Behaviours result in negative Workplace Consequences that manifest themselves as low productivity and quality, and prevent the organisation from realising its potential level of achievement.

If the workplace conditions have changed due to Unleashing, the subordinate will exhibit automatic response behaviours which allow them to move closer to attaining their full potential. This results in Energised Behaviour, the desired Subordinate Behaviours, which in turn result in the positive Workplace Consequences of high productivity and quality. The organisation thus realises its potential level of achievement.

Workplace Consequences
Energised Behaviour results in positive Workplace Consequences such as low absenteeism and high output quality, productivity and profitability. Tawdry Behaviour results in negative Workplace Consequences such as high absenteeism or Exit, and low output quality and productivity.

Negative Workplace Consequences affect the organisation’s bottom line and if not addressed can contribute to operating difficulties. A leader will have contributed to cause this situation and only positive Leader Strategies can remedy it.
Positive Workplace Consequences can help avoid operating difficulties for an organisation. Leaders contribute to this situation and maintain work performance at these levels because of their approach. The resultant Leader Response Behaviours, if devised to reinforce Subordinate Behaviours and Workplace Consequences, will ensure that Energised Behaviour is sustained by maintaining Attainment Deficit at the optimum level.

**Leader Strategies**

Leaders either fail to perceive Subordinate Behaviours, and so adopt no strategies, or else do perceive them and then process what they perceive. The processing of the perceived Subordinate Behaviours relies on three cognitive processes. Leaders have varying degrees of concern, problem internalisation and strategy adoption.

This sequence of cognitive processes (Figure 3) is a Leader Response Behaviour which links Subordinate Behaviours, or Workplace Consequences, to Leader Strategies.

Leaders can be emotionally predisposed to consider the effect work circumstances may have on a subordinate. A leader with concern for their subordinates may experience empathy for the subordinates, the desire to handle things well and to motivate workers, and may reflect on their interactions. Such leaders are seen by subordinates as having desirable traits which include being honest, helpful, observant, credible, and trustworthy.

Concern by a leader for their subordinates may lead to Problem Internalisation and therefore to the adoption of Leader Strategies. A leader who has a lack of concern does not adopt Leader Strategies and can not minimise subordinates’ Attainment Deficit. The following quote showing the recognition and the resentment by a subordinate, and the demonstrated lack of concern by the supervisor clearly exemplify this point.

“You know what actually inspires me in leadership; the person who will make the decision and stick to it and go ahead and do it instead of someone that hums and hahs and says i’ll get back to you, and it might be a day or so later. So in the mean time you’ve actually had to do the job. I did that when I was a ganger with a certain engineer. There’d be something tricky going on, I’d say listen Alistair, … what should we do here. And he says i’ll get back to you and I know for a fact that because it’s a tricky situation he won’t get back for a
couple of days; you just have to go ahead and do it. But if something goes wrong he’ll say ‘what did you go and do it that way for’.” C:25

When leaders do not utilise Problem Internalisation they do, by default, utilise Blame Externalisation by not acknowledging that they can mitigate the impacts on subordinates of work related problems or issues. Subordinates see this as their work problems being ignored and such leaders do not adopt Leader Strategies. Problem Internalisation includes the cognitive processes of Enhance Perceptions and Enhance Understanding (Leader Centered Strategies) and results in leaders taking responsibility for troublesome situations. This leads them to adopting Subordinate Centered Strategies, Environment Centered Strategies, or Leader Centered Strategies.

Subordinate Centered Strategies
A Leader Strategies can focus on subordinates, as people, and endeavour to modify the conditions that exist which are influencing Subordinate Behaviours. Three Subordinate Centered Strategies have been identified in the RTA. These are:

- Subordinate Status
- Develop Subordinates
- Support Subordinates.

Subordinate Status is that Leader Strategy which monitors the subordinates’ frame of mind, and so their Attainment Deficit. It also monitors the need subordinates have for themselves to be better equipped to do their work, and the need to be able to work in a more conducive environment. Subordinate Status provides vital input into the cognitive process during which a leader devises Attainment Deficit minimising strategies to implement.

Develop Subordinates is that Leader Strategy which focuses on the subordinates’ capabilities and attempts to increase these capabilities. Increased capabilities through team involvement, being provided guidance such as mentoring, and being provided opportunities to enhance specific skills ensure that subordinates are more easily able to obtain satisfaction from their work. A satisfied employee has a minimal Attainment Deficit and is committed to achieving high productivity for the RTA.

Support Subordinates is that Leader Strategy which focuses on the subordinates’ work. As part of this strategy leaders attempt to provide the appropriate level of help for each subordinate. This strategy also provides the feedback required so that a subordinate knows that they are completing their work correctly. An outcome of this strategy can be the realisation by a leader that a Develop Subordinates strategy is required.

Environment Centered Strategies
A Leader can focus on the environment within which the subordinates operate so as to set the context for a conducive atmosphere for the subordinates. This environment consists of Extra-organisational and Organisational influences and so require strategies to control or modify the impact on subordinates of these influences.

Extra-organisational influences occur at a Political level and at a Legislative level. At the Political level there may be impacts on workers from excessive Government involvement in RTA business. This can effect work priorities through changes in fund allocations and changes in Government policies. Legislation changes can impact on Motor Registry and Vehicle Regulations staff.

Organisational influences occur at the Entirety, Unit/Sectional, Team, and Individual level. At the Entirety level the influence is more remote to subordinates; at the Individual level only the individual workers perceive themselves affected. The closer the source of impact to a subordinate, the greater the impact on their behaviour. When a leader closely monitors the work environment, he/she can quickly respond to issues which arise for an Individual or a Team. Less obvious to the leader are impacts from issues that arise at the Sectional level or affect the organisation as a whole. These impacts can, over time, be as detrimental to Subordinate Behaviours as are the more immediate issues.
Leader Centered Strategies

A Leader can focus on themselves in order to improve their own leadership skills so as to more effectively Unleash subordinates. Cognitive Processes are undertaken by a leader to become aware of and understand conditions which exist in work relationships. These processes are a pre-requisite for Accomplishment Strategies in which the leader attempts to change the observed conditions by changing their own behaviours. A “do nothing” strategy is a valid choice but is unlikely to cause any change.

A leader who does not appear to engage in the Cognitive Processes also does not appear to be cognisant of subordinate needs and so is unable to adopt Develop Subordinates or Support Subordinates strategies.

It has been found that Environment Centered Strategies are most common, but prove least effective. Subordinate Centered Strategies are not as common but have greater success in reducing Attainment Deficit. Leaders realise such a reduction by developing strategies to Support Subordinates, but the less common strategies to Develop Subordinates seem to achieve greater reductions in Attainment Deficit. Few leaders are employing Self Centered Strategies. The hurdle here might be that of having to admit to oneself that one could be doing something differently, or doing something more effectively. Leaders engaging in Cognitive Processes can more easily move their focus from Environment Centered to Subordinate Centered Strategies. Some of these leaders also move themselves to Accomplishment Strategies. These Leader Strategies are the major component of this research.

When a leader inadvertently (or deliberately) engages negative subordinate centered, environment centered, or self centered strategies the consequence is to Limit subordinates.

Consequences

Workers are Unleashed by supervisors fully adopting Leader Strategies. Unleashing a worker is the total unrestraining of that worker so that there is no impediment to them attaining their full Potential. In this case “Present Reality” is virtually synonymous with “full Potential” and there is little which remains unattainable and so a very small Attainment Deficit results.

Supervisors who do not adopt Leader Strategies, on the other hand, Limit workers. This is the perceived hindrance of achievement to well below that level which a worker believes themselves capable. This creates a large Attainment Deficit.

“… I think that what I found out just reflects that a lot of people don’t use half of what they could or what they’re capable of … I don’t see the RTA as challenging so it has made me think the RTA is not the place to stay.” 2:42

When workers feel constrained in this way they expect their leaders to Unleash them from these constraints and to facilitate the achievement of their goals, needs, etc. Subordinates exist along a continuum between Limited Subordinate and Unleashed Subordinate (Figure 4). This Subordinate Status should be monitored by leaders to enable them to adopt strategies.

![Figure 4: Subordinate Status Continuum](image)

When leader behaviour contributes to, and nurtures, subordinates in the quest to attain their full potential, or to extend beyond the current, they minimise Attainment Deficit. When a leader does not engage this behaviour but constrains subordinates and prevents them from attaining their full potential they fail to minimise Attainment Deficit. This can induce Tawdry Behaviour.
Conclusion

Minimising Attainment Deficit relies on existing theories of Organisational Behaviour and utilises these in the context of the cyclic leadership process. Literature is available to explain subordinate behaviours, their causes and their consequences. This research does not intend to duplicate or verify these existing postulates but places them in this context of a process.

The major contribution of this theory is the Leader Strategies. Much work is still required to fully define these and explore all the conditions under which they occur. A leader in the RTA can benefit from this theory by utilising Leader Strategies to achieve increased productivity through maintaining the workers’ Attainment Deficit at a minimum. The attainment of an employee’s full potential means that all their skills and abilities are of benefit to the organisation and contribute to the bottom line. These employees also experience job satisfaction.

References