Learning how to lead self before leading others: an industry perspective from Australia

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There are two separate but closely related issues that when taken together will have a profound impact on the quality of the workforce in the coming years. These topics are how organizations achieve excellence in workforce development, and how they prepare the current and next generation of leaders for a less-predictable future where the strategies of today seem to change overnight and become inappropriate for tomorrow.

Building leadership capability and cultivating leadership talent to cope with unending change are well-recognised as global priorities (Gould, 2005) and the idea of developing leaders is neither new nor unique. However, with ever-increasing studies on leadership readily available and an overwhelming array of development products to choose from, many organizations have difficulty in deciding where to begin, at the same time ensuring they get value from investments in leadership programs. Moreover, as the workforce becomes more mobile and globally diverse, traditional forms of leadership education and training, derived largely from Anglo-American paradigms, no longer seem appropriate in a global setting. These developments have special relevance in Australia where globalisation and strategic alliances have opened-up new ways of understanding not only the nature of the workplace, but how leaders are developed to cope with emerging management practices such as remote working, 24/7 operations and virtual team leadership using smart technology.

Meta-competency

Research conducted in the Australian rail industry during 2009-2011 by the CRC for Rail Innovation (Short et al., 2011) analysed a wide range of leadership capability frameworks and found over 30 themes of potential development, but top of the list were three areas, referred to as meta-competencies, that preceded all other attributes and skills. These meta-competencies were: relationship building, interpersonal communication and self-awareness. The notion of meta-competency has been around for some time and is a term used to distinguish higher order abilities which are connected with being able to learn, adapt, anticipate and create (Burgoyne, 1989, in Brown, 1993). Another viewpoint is to consider a meta-competence as “that which allows someone to locate a particular competence within a larger framework of understanding” (Fleming, 1993, p. 6).

Self-awareness and self-efficacy

Moreover, meta-competencies underpin a new variation of leadership capability that has emerged in the last few decades and has been applied in professional roles where managers are empowered to create and define their own work roles. In order to achieve this, a higher level of self-awareness and self-efficacy are essential. In simple terms, self-efficacy is a term used in psychology to describe how people see the world and behave. It is
suggested that people with higher self-efficacy feel in control of their lives whereas people with lower self-efficacy feel controlled by other people or events.

The Australian rail research indicated that developing a manager's self-awareness and encouraging positive self-efficacy should become the starting point of building leadership capability because this activity encourages the manager under development to use a wide range of cognitive processes such as:

- focusing attention and evaluating current behaviour to internal standards and values;
- recognising one's personality characteristics, strengths, weakness, likes and dislikes;
- having a clear perception of one's personality, emotions and self-esteem; and
- knowing how you relate to others and what makes you happy.

According to a report by Hayman (2010), self-awareness among Australian managers was at an all-time low and this deficiency was having a drastic impact on individual and organization performance. The Hayman report revealed a significant disconnect between a manager's perceived and actual behaviour, while another report found that Australian managers tended to overrate their performance (Green, 2009). The rail-related research indicated that developing a heightened self-awareness, as a learning priority and before all other leadership education or training, would confront this issue head-on and would allow leaders to understand other people, evaluate how they were perceived by others and help determine how they would respond to them. In 2000, Daniel Goleman described self-awareness as one of the key attributes of Emotional Intelligence, together with social awareness, self-management and relationship competence. In the rail study, self-awareness was found to be a pre-requisite activity to building strong interpersonal communications and relationships, as well as developing empathy for others.

Therefore, to build self-awareness and positive self-efficacy among rail managers, the research considered a wide range of readily-available HRD tools and psychological instruments such as 360 degree feedback models and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®). In practice, many of these products were already known and utilised in many of the case study organizations, but had been used in a post-training capacity rather than at the beginning.

Self-evaluation

Taking Hayman’s suggestion further (that Australian managers were perhaps lacking in self-awareness and overrated their performance), the CRC research used an on-line survey tool to ask a sample of 240 rail managers to reflect on 15 descriptors of leadership capability, derived from a thematic analysis of 20 leading capability frameworks; first, to self-assess the level of perceived capability in their immediate work team and second, to evaluate the relevance of each descriptor to the rail environment (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked to include evaluations of their own capability as part of the team. It was thought that by aggregating a larger number of responses, where individuals could rate their own capability within a team setting, would minimise the chance of self-interest or delusion and improve overall validity. Earlier in the research, the feedback from case studies had indicated that self-aware managers, with positive self-efficacy, were more likely to give authentic accounts of leadership performance and want to take part in shaping their own development.
This simple analysis indicated that the self-efficacy of rail managers was generally more positive in terms of their perceived leadership capability (ranging from 68 to 88 per cent). Likewise, the results suggested that respondents had a clear perception of what factors were most relevant to the industry and what were not. Putting these two evaluations together, a picture developed of which areas might be seen as capability areas for further development.

In Table I, the results illustrate seven leadership descriptors from those listed in Figure 1 considered as most relevant and interestingly, these revealed the highest capability gap (−11 per cent to −25 per cent), while the seven descriptors considered least relevant on Table I had a lowest capability gap (less than 15 per cent) and in one case (political awareness) the respondents perceive the presence of a 3 per cent skills surplus.
Leadership development

Considering the principles of adult learning, it follows that leadership development directed towards the seven items considered as most relevant would be met with more enthusiasm and yield greater value for money; while those seven items listed as least relevant might struggle to engage the learners. For example, in the area of political awareness, respondents believed they had a 3 per cent capability surplus. Of particular interest was a range of qualitative comments made by respondents in relation to why the learning gap was higher in areas most relevant to the industry – reflecting the extent to which managers were already predisposed to self-analysis and prepared to engage in a critical self-evaluation of their immediate supervisors. Managers were asked the following questions and a small sample of responses is given:

What would you like your manager to stop doing?
1. Being reactive and leaving things to the last minute.
2. Wasting time on non-core issues.
3. Withholding information that others need to know.
4. Being indecisive and passive.
5. Forming a view before the facts are known.

What attributes do you value in your own approach to leadership?
1. Maintain and communicate the vision.
2. Create a team spirit towards achieving the goals and targets.
3. My ability to plan organise and build relationships.
4. I am open, approachable and understand the needs of my team.
5. I believe in honesty, trust and open communications (Source: Short et al., 2011).

Summary

The findings within this research are part of a wider picture, but they suggest that self-aware managers have much to offer, especially in defining the priorities for leadership and organization development. Not only do self-aware managers have an informed voice, but also they are able to project that voice with positive self-efficacy and direct their skills towards leading the business. The idea of being able to lead oneself before leading others seems an obvious statement, but the question of whether some people are more pre-disposed to this capability than others is an area for ongoing discussion. The findings in this research recognise the significance of self-awareness as posited by Hayman (2010), but this analysis indicates that Australian managers might be less-deficient in self-awareness than previously reported, and more importantly recognises the value of self-evaluation as a precursor to participating in wider learning activities.

References


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**About the author**

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