

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN A MOVING CONTEXT

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Abstract:

The success of workplace training initiatives is increasingly connected with how programs of learning are aligned with, and take account of, the organisational context. This is especially true in the area of leadership and management development where Currie (1999) concluded that unless there was congruence between the context of the organisation as perceived by the participants and the development initiative being introduced, the initiative was likely to be unsuccessful. Using selected findings obtained from a two-year research project within the Australian Rail Industry, as part of the CRC for Rail Innovation, this paper draws insight on how leadership and management capability are being developed in an era of changing contexts. In this setting, context is defined by external characteristics of the rapidly changing environment in which rail organisations operate. Drawing information from the literature on leadership, a selection of rail reports, interview data and a content analysis of learning materials taken from rail organisations, this paper evaluates if current management training programs are developing rail leaders with the knowledge and skills to cope with a selection of ever-changing contexts.

Background

The global economic challenges of 2008 have redefined many of the strategic problems confronting organisations in Australia, and the rail industry, like many others, is going through a period of major transformation. Changes include the upgrading of infrastructure, harmonising interstate differences and dealing with the increasing diversity of human capital employed in the industry. As a result, rail industry managers and leaders are faced with new organisational contexts that are characterised by increasing complexity and dynamism in the external environment. The literature on business strategy suggests that globalisation and market competition are putting managers under great pressure to perform and maintain capability, but is this challenge possible in an unstable environment where the strategies of today can become inappropriate for the context of tomorrow?

In the field of workplace education and training, few subjects have attracted more interest than the area of leadership and management development. This fascination has held the attention of business schools and organisations for decades, and leadership has 'been studied more extensively than any other aspect of human behaviour' (Higgs 2003, p.27). Estimates vary, but the global market for this type of employment-related training activity appears to be at its peak and was estimated at US\$37 billion per year in 1996, but may be as high as US\$70 billion a decade later (Boyatzis, R. E., Leonard, D., Rhee, K. and Wheeler, J. V. 1996). In 1999, over 2,000 books were published on the topic of leadership in North America alone, perhaps reflecting one reason why US firms continue to lead in the area of people management (Goffee and Jones 2000; Day 2001; Green 2009). The motivation for this ongoing interest is a belief that effective leadership has a profound influence on business performance, competitive advantage and long-term survivability, especially in a globalised economy (Thompson 1995; Oakland 1999; Buus 2006).

Historically, approaches to leadership theory have been dominated by attempts to find a universal or nation-specific collection of attributes, skills and behaviour that distinguishes leaders from non-leaders' (Jepson 2008, p37) but 'many of the theories on leadership appear to be context free' (Boal and Hooijberg 2000, p.258). However, research is finally coming to recognise that the ever-changing environment in which contemporary managers are required to lead takes generic development programs to the limits of utility (Porter and McLaughlin 2006; Tosi 1991). Throughout this major period of growth there has been endless debate about the best way of developing the competencies and abilities required of present-day managers, who lead in rapidly changing environments. Globalisation has impacted profoundly on how organisations conduct their management processes (Howard and Wellings 2009) and business schools programs have been singled-out for special critique (Buckley, Monks and Connor 2002). In particular, the MBA type model of management education, popular in the late 1980s, has been criticised as a flawed program that results in surface level learning which transfers well to low complexity settings, but falls short in fast-changing dynamic environments (Willmott 1994).

Part of the argument is that managers in emerging complex work environments, such as the J-form organisation developed from Mintzberg's classic typology (Mintzberg 1979, Lam 2000), need to develop meta-competencies within the setting of an organisational context, in addition to assimilating technical or commercial knowledge and skills from external settings such as business schools (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell 1994).

Context

In the past fifteen years, increasing attention has been given in the literature towards the role of organisational context in the development of leaders (Black and Earnest 2009). Research conducted in the New Zealand manufacturing sector discovered that employees are much more sensitive to the contextual characteristics of the internal environment than they appear. These contexts included organisational culture, performance climate and identifying with a national pride. Moreover, managers played an important role in aligning employees with the unique contextual characteristics of the enterprise. This communication process is akin to an emerging assortment of employee engagement activities Short and Coggan (2009) called *place-making*. Furthermore, the well-known concept of 'the learning organisation' (Senge 1990) recognises that social learning, which can include leadership development, does not happen in a vacuum, but in context to an organisational setting.

While much attention is given in strategic texts to understanding the external environment of an organisation, how a leader chooses to behave is, to a large extent dependent upon the internal context (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch 2002; Porter and McLaughlin 2006). Thompson (1995, p.36) refers to this process of internal synergy as 'architecture'. For example, managers in a manufacturing firm may adapt totally different leadership behaviours to managers in retail or a professional service environment. It follows that some leaders may be highly successful and suited to one particular context and fail spectacularly in another setting (Jepson 2009). Hay Group research has shown 'up to 30 percent of variance in business results can be explained by differences in the internal work climate created by managers and without a proper context, people simply fail to perform' (Ambler 2007). Therefore, the case for understanding more about the context of leadership is increasing and drawing greater attention.

For years, the phenomenon of leadership has been explored in great depth, but there is still a good shortage of empirical research on the way in which the context of leadership shapes its practice (Barker 2001; Berry and Cartwright 2000). In a review of twenty-one major journals taken from the leadership literature between 1990 and 2005, Porter and McLaughlin (2006) found that empirical research on the significance of context was lacking. Andrews and Field (1998) call for a regrouping of the concept of leadership through an empirical analysis of the importance of context and as leadership theory has evolved and become increasingly complex ‘the notion of context has become more significant, despite a lack of attention. Research is coming to recognise context as a primary area of focus’ (Jepson 2009, p.37). Likewise, Porter states that, ‘we have given too little attention to the internal organisation environment affecting behaviour’ (Porter 1996, p.264) and Osborn, Hunt and Jauch (2004) talk about context being the neglected side of leadership (p.832) and they argue, change the context and leadership changes. In a study of 373 reviewed articles, 65 percent of articles made no reference to organisational context (Porter and McLaughlin 2006, p.562). Therefore it is apparent that the impact of organisational context, especially in leadership and management development is an under-researched area.

The Australian rail context

In addition to the lack of information on context, reports indicate that little is known of how leadership actually happens in Australia. Most of the material on leadership is drawn from the US or Europe and even within the US literature, leadership examples are most frequently drawn from the business sector and focus largely on Anglo-Celtic men. This is not a true reflection on the diversity found in Australasian society or of leaders in Australia (Dalglish and Evans 2007; Green 2009).

Moreover, the rail industry in Australia has its own unique characteristics and these are shaped by a long history of constructing a modern rail infrastructure across the nation, overcoming geographical and cultural challenges and embedding a technical mindset into a largely male dominated workplace. Throughout this period, progress has been frustrated by interstate differences, including the installation of different track widths and multiple signalling devices. To a large extent, rail organisations in each state have dealt with leadership and management development in their own way. However, reports now indicate that global developments, such as the pressing need for environmentally sustainable transportation options and faster travel between major cities are changing the external context of the rail industry, requiring a level of adaptation and co-operation not foreseen in previous generations (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006, Infohrm 2008). This change is being spearheaded at a strategic level by the rail industry lead body, the Australasian Railway Association (ARA).

In order to explore how rail organisations are taking account of context when developing managers and leaders, this paper draws on findings from a major research project conducted in the Australian rail sector. The project aims to evaluate the potential for developing an industry-wide capability framework on leadership and management and forms part of a wider education and training research program contained within the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for Rail Innovation; a collaborative research venture between leading Australian universities and rail industry organisations, with the support of the Australian Commonwealth Government.

Methodology

The methodology chosen to identify how context influences the development of leadership programs in the Australian rail industry combines three approaches; firstly, a review of relevant literature in the field of leadership and management development; secondly, an examination of recent reports and publications developed for policy makers within the rail industry and finally, an analysis of findings from case study reports carried out in four rail organisations. In terms of employee numbers, these four organisations represent 50 percent of the Australian rail industry and account for the development offered to almost 2,500 managers at varying levels of seniority - ranging from first-line supervisors to executives. In each organisation, a semi-structured interview was held with human resource managers and learning and development professionals using a pre-prepared questionnaire of 35 items. The aim of this activity was to review the existing arrangements on leadership and management development and gain an appreciation of how emerging contexts featured in the design and delivery of program content. In addition, documents and training materials provided by the participating organisations added empirical evidence. The key strength of this qualitative-interpretive methodology was twofold; firstly, the research combined in-depth feedback obtained from conversation-based interviews within the structure of a pre-determined interview schedule and secondly, findings were cross-referenced with the literature and documents provided by each organisation.

This paper compares the contextual characteristic of leadership against two concept models as illustrated in Table 1. Firstly, a four stage approach was used to define the process of how typical leadership and management training programs were designed and implemented in the four organisations. These well-known stages are referred to as the *training cycle* and include; gaining organisational commitment, developing content and structure, deciding on training delivery and finally, determining strategies for assessment and evaluation (Rabey 1986; Meighan 1991 and Laird D 1985). Secondly, six emerging contexts were identified from the UK's Leadership Trust - an educational charitable organisation whose sole focus is leadership and leadership development for the benefit of individuals, groups, organisations and communities worldwide. These contexts include: globalisation, generational, sustainability, diversity, technology and change (Damon 2009). Although the use of a single model may limit the drawing of conclusions, the significance of these new contexts is recognised by Howard and Wellings (2009, p.7) who argues that a leader is 'someone who manages the performance or responsibilities of other individuals ... in an increasingly complex job, as technological innovation, speed of change and global competition stiffens' (p.7). Porter and McLaughlin (2006, p.563) also discovered that the major components of organisational context included an evaluation of culture and climate, goals and purpose, organisational processes, and structure and time. In particular, this research looked at how rail organisations accommodated these dimensions of context when designing the overall architecture of leadership and management development programs. According to Thompson (1995), architecture refers to the many processes used by organisations to match the internal environment with external challenges. Effective strategic architecture is thought to lead to sustainable competitive advantage and improved business performance. Every organisation is affected by external factors and management development programs aim to develop the internal capabilities of leaders to accommodate and deal with the impact of these external factors (Green 2009).

Table 1 A conceptual structure for analysing context in leadership programs

Stages of leadership development	Area of interest within the case studies					
Organisational commitment and climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ascertaining the policy on leadership development • Alignment with business strategy and goals • Linkages with performance management systems • Internal challenges facing the organisation • External challenges facing the organisation • How the benefits of leadership development were communicated 					
Content and structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How leadership was segmented to meet the needs of management groups • Knowledge to be gained from leadership and management development • Structure of course modules and programs • Alignment and accreditation with external qualifications 					
Program delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of training/education providers • Use of different approaches to learning • Use of coaching techniques and mentoring programs • Location of training and development 					
Assessment and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process of assessing skills before, during and after the development • Evaluation of development at individual and organisational levels • Identification of improvements in management performance 					

						
Contextual dimensions (Leadership Trust)	Globalisation	Generational	Sustainability	Diversity	Technology	Change
Contextual dimensions (Porter and McLaughlin)	Culture/Climate		Goals/Purpose	Organisational processes	Structure and Time	

Findings and discussion

The findings contained in this paper represent an aggregate of feedback obtained from four organisations and are therefore indicative of how the rail industry deals with the six areas of context identified by the Leadership Trust. To aid analysis, three levels are used in Table 2 to evaluate the extent of ‘contextual-awareness’.

Table 2 Contextual awareness

High level of awareness Evident in many policy documents, organisational systems and communication processes. Awareness of the external context flows through leadership development programs and affects internal practices	Moderate level of awareness Evident in some policy documents and organisational systems, The external context rarely features in internal communications. Leadership development is inward looking but recognises the external environment as a strategic consideration	Lower level of awareness Little evidence in policy documents or systems relating to the external context. Internal communications and procedures are aligned to the internal needs of the organisation and take limited account of the external environment.
	Globalisation	
	Generational	
		Diversity
Sustainability		
Technology		
Change		

Black and Earnest (2009, p.186) suggest that leadership development programs are 'complex webs of relationships, motivations and interactions' and for these reasons the evidence gathered from each of four stages of leadership development in Table 1 was consolidated into each of the six themes identified by the Leadership Trust:

Globalisation (Lower): is a commonly understood phenomenon and deals, among many things, with the impact of a smaller economic world, open market competition, faster travel, labour mobility and the rise of multi-national organisations.

Rail organisations in Australia were found to operate under three structural conditions; public sector agencies, private operators and franchised train operating companies, often owned by multi-national corporations (MNC). Green (2009) reported that MNCs have much better access to global leadership development programs and therefore have more exposure to the impact of global issues. However, the rail organisations in this research were weighted proportionally toward the public sector and therefore adopted an inward facing or national perspective to management development, but made use of international best practice and benchmark information when constructing leadership programs. Senior managers were recruited frequently from overseas companies to fill top positions and this infusion of wider experience influenced both policy development and the selection of training methods. In terms of curriculum design, the study of globalisation featured more strongly in senior level, academic courses than it did in first-line supervisory programs. Each of the rail organisations, in this sample, used management briefing presentations to share a vision of the company and explain the strategic challenges, but these were focussed largely on national and rail-centric goals. In regard to training delivery and assessment, some use was made of international profiling and evaluation instruments, often developed from Anglo-American research and/or consulting organisations.

Generational (Moderate): addresses the issues and requirements when employing an older workforce, a longer living society and lack of young people available for work. It deals with the values and beliefs of diverse generational groups (sometimes called Baby-boomer, Generation X and Y). Taken together with globalisation, it poses a major issue for attracting sufficient numbers of young people into the rail industry. In this regard, leaders have a profound impact on harnessing and harmonising the aspirations of different generational groups.

The Australian rail industry has two major human resource problems; an aging workforce and a failure to attract sufficient number of younger people (ARA 2008; PricewaterhouseCoopers 2006). Moreover, rail organisations are faced with the major challenge of adapting their work cultures to accommodate the needs of younger managers, who unlike earlier generations have differing expectations of employers (MacLeod 2008). In regard to leadership development, three strategies were used to address the needs of different groups and age profiles: (1) an opportunity for younger graduates to pursue post-graduate qualifications, especially at the technical level, (2) progressive and voluntary participation in leadership/management development at first line, middle and senior levels for non-graduate managers and (3) skills recognition processes for migrant workers or older managers who wished to gain formal credit for their accumulated experience. Coaching and mentoring programs were used widely in each of the case study organisations to bridge generational gaps and facilitate the dissemination of tacit knowledge among managers, but evidence of the overall effectiveness of these strategies was not available.

Diversity (Lower): confronts managers to recognise the challenges of dealing with a multi-cultural workforce, gender balance, more transient employees, recognising internationally acquired skills and finding a place for everyone to contribute – irrespective of their background.

The context of diversity combines with the previous two areas and compounds the central challenge for human resources managers (HRM) as they attempt to fill skill vacancies left by an ageing workforce. The rail organisations in this research were drawing human capital from overseas to meet the increasing demand for train drivers, signal engineers and engineering graduates. To reduce the cost of training, and speed-up the time from induction to becoming operational, elaborate skills recognition process such as RPL/RCC were deployed, but often more management training or development was needed to take account of the Australian rail context. In many cases, management training programs involved some indoctrination into the company ethos or alignment with the corporate values and for these reasons, bespoke in house training was valued more than formal academic courses. Rail organisations offered programs aimed at improving numeracy and literacy for employees where English was a second language, or where upskilling was required within the existing workforce. However, strategic HRM issues, such as the gender imbalance in rail and cross-cultural awareness were not overtly designed into leadership programs, especially at the front line level. Instead, the context of cultural diversity had a much higher profile in the deployment of HRM strategy than it did in the design and delivery of leadership programs. In most cases, the issues associated with diversity were included in management induction programs, special briefing sessions or featured at rail conferences, where senior executives engaged in ongoing debate and informal networking as a means of professional development.

Sustainability (Moderate): is fast becoming the major issue of our time as managers balance the green agenda with challenging commercial goals – an agenda driven by doing the responsible thing, not just for now but for future generations.

A combination of the global financial crisis in late 2008 and an increasing public awareness of climate change prompted major investments in rail infrastructure and mass transportation projects. At the same time, modern rail technology can now demonstrate an environmentally sustainable edge over other forms of mass transport, such as aviation (Nye 2009). In each of the case study organisations, executives used internal communications and briefing systems to promote the importance of building sustainability in today's business environment. However, beyond these notions of strategic awareness, little evidence could be found that rail organisations were integrating any study of sustainability into their leadership development curricula. By and large, leadership programs were directed towards a range of meta-competencies or personal capabilities that would enable the manager to adapt and apply knowledge across many contexts. These recurring themes included: strategic thinking, communication skills, building relationships, commercial awareness, planning tasks, making decisions and solving problems. More specifically, the area of sustainability and its linkages with management of the environment did not appear explicitly in program design or delivery and was neither assessed nor evaluated. In contrast, the specialist area of sustainability featured more in technical or advanced management development programs at a tertiary level of study. Accordingly, this approach directed the learning and development on sustainability to senior managers or professional engineers rather than first line supervisors.

Technology (High): is ever-changing. Once at the forefront of technology, rail has the challenge of reclaiming its position in the hearts and minds of future employees who are excited about technology, innovation and adventure. Leaders of today need to be tech-savvy.

Rail reports included in this paper indicate the leadership culture of rail in Australia continues to be driven by an engineering mindset. Rail has embraced new technology for decades, yet due to an under investment in capital, many parts of the industry are beleaguered with old and outdated equipment. Moreover, a widespread dispersal of diverse technologies across the country means that leaders in one organisation may have different technical challenges to their counterparts elsewhere. Fortunately, the current climate of investment in the rail industry is driving a major leap forward in technological advancement. Rail reports indicate the prevailing culture of valuing technology over people is presenting a paradox for rail leaders. On one hand, it is important to attract and engage younger employees who are already used to modern technology and systems. However, the highest percentage of leaders in the sample (58 percent) fell within the age range of 45-63 (commonly known as the Baby Boomer generation), but these employees are regarded as less tech savvy than other groups and only 11 percent of younger people prefer to work with them (Sardo 2008). In the case study organisations, computer-based technology was used to train managers in diverse locations, though the success of this technique depended upon three factors: (1) quality of learning materials, (2) ability/motivation of the manager to use it and (3) the level of leader undertaking development. For example, older front-line leaders were less tech savvy than younger graduates. For these reasons, the evaluation of success was mixed and at the first line level, e-learning or in-line programs were frequently less successful than traditional training courses. All of the case study organisations used blended learning techniques to ensure that learning was aligned with the organisational context (a mix of classroom, on-line learning and on-job coaching).

Finally, *Change (High)*: how rail managers accept the inevitability of change and lead other people through the processes of adaptation and improvement.

It was easy to observe and interpret from the information collected in each of the case studies that rail organisations were acutely aware of the need for change as a future business imperative. Leadership development programs were seen as an integral part of the change management process. Interestingly, change as a particular area of study, was not overt in many of the program modules, yet the context of change was ever-present as an underpinning feature of the learning methodology. This is a measure of how far rail organisations, and others, have moved in recent years to recognise the inevitability of change. Additionally, the use of orientation programs and briefing mechanisms helped to prime leaders of the need for change and was a common feature in each organisation. This communication of the need for change-related behaviours was further reinforced in performance management systems. Accordingly, when leaders embarked on a management development program, they intrinsically knew the program included a requirement for change. Unfortunately, the methods used to assess and evaluate the degree of individual and teams changes generated from leadership development programs were unsophisticated or absent. Respondents commented that part of the difficulty in recognising how change impacted on specific contexts was due to the holistic nature of leadership development outcomes, though climate surveys conducted among employees offered some degree of feedback.

Conclusions

This paper discussed six emerging contextual themes which need to be considered within leadership development programs and the extent to which they are currently acknowledged in training curriculum. It was found that each of the four rail organisations designed and delivered leadership programs with varying levels of context awareness, but context was largely overlooked in assessment and evaluation practices. The extent to which the rail organisations in this paper aligned their leadership development with the emerging contextual themes identified by the Leadership Trust is interpreted and shown as a representational diagram on Table 2. During analysis, it became evident the six themes were heavily interrelated, as one theme interacted with the next to form a contextual construction, based on culture. Moreover, the analysis of findings revealed three areas: a higher level of contextual awareness in the areas of change and technology; a mid range awareness in the areas of generational and sustainability contexts and finally, a lower level of awareness in the areas of diversity and globalisation. In relation to the latter, the existence of rail as a national and self-contained Australian transportation system, with limited global functionality and a largely mono-cultural workforce, may underpin these findings. Another observation showed the high contextual awareness of change and technology in leadership development materials - across the full spectrum of management trainees, from supervisors to executives, whereas diversity issues and globalisation were contained mainly to the strategic level leadership programs. Although the literature revealed numerous and varied dimensions of context, this paper found through a limited review of one model that context affects organisational culture, is relevant to the rail industry and helps managers to deal with change. However, the findings may be relevant to other non-managerial areas and it would be interesting to explore the implications for the broader vocational education and training system. Therefore, further research is needed to understand how other contexts contrast with these findings on leadership development.

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