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A competency approach to developing leaders – is this approach effective?

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This paper examines the underlying assumptions that competency-based frameworks are based upon in relation to leadership development. It examines the impetus for this framework becoming the prevailing theoretical base for developing leaders and tracks the historical path to this phenomenon. Research suggests that a competency-based framework may not be the most appropriate tool in leadership development across many organisations, despite the existence of these tools in those organisations, and reasons for this are offered. Varying approaches to developing effective leaders are considered and it is suggested that leading is complex as it requires both competencies and qualities in order for a person to be an effective leader. It is argued that behaviourally-based competencies only cater to a specific part of the equation when they relate to leadership development.

Introduction

A great deal of attention has been given to leadership development, and it has emerged as a profitable industry in its own right over the last decade. Universities and corporations in Australia have played an enthusiastic part in the onslaught of leadership training and development initiatives in which a competency-based approach to leadership development has become the dominant approach. This paper questions the effectiveness of a competency framework for developing leaders in a work-related environment and considers the reasons why it may not be appropriate as the prevailing theoretical base for developing leaders.

The paper draws on data collected from interviews conducted with senior leaders from a number of corporations. I will outline what they regarded as the essential elements of effective leadership and compare these with the offerings of a competency-based approach and consider the compatibility between them. It is suggested that competencies as a framework and system were developed as more a political and social response to a perceived need that Australians required upskilling. Further, although competencies may be suitable for some types of skill development, the competency framework system from whence it derived is not easily migrated to cater to the complexities of leadership and its development. Developing leaders is a complex issue and a competency-based matrix may be fundamentally too narrow to prepare someone in such complexities.

For the purposes of this paper, 'leadership' is defined as being distinctly different from 'management'. Day (2001) suggests that a management role refers to processes and activities that need a person to manage them, whereas a leadership role is more about a person leading in scenarios whereby there are no prescribed situations or outcomes. He suggests that the leader must work in unforeseen circumstances and, in order to do this effectively, the person must have considerable skills, attributes and knowledge. The role of the leader is about engaging others to work within a context that has no predetermined outcome, and therefore both Hollenbeck, McCall and Silzer (2006) and Day (2001) caution that due to the complexity of leadership and the outcomes that are sought, we must not confuse a leader with a person who 'manages' a set and given task.

A competency-based framework reviewed

Hodge (2007) reminds us that competencies incorporate 'skills, knowledge and behaviours'. However, literature on management and leadership has extolled for some time that leadership competencies and qualities are two distinct but critical elements of effective leadership and that, in a development sense, both these aspects need to be taken into consideration (Donovan & Jackson 1991).

There are numerous sources regarding competency systems and frameworks that address the political and economic drivers underpinning the introduction of such systems (e.g. Hawke 2000, Hodge 2007). It has been suggested that competency-based systems have led to a shift in the way training is conducted and that they have led to a more corporate based training focus; however, it is argued that the critical paths that led us to the competencies of today has had both a political and social impetus that stems from the USA over two decades ago. Gonczi (2000) questions the effectiveness of such a framework, and examines what has occurred in other countries in his attempt to evaluate it. He examines the complexities of adult education and suggests that there are many factors that determine if a worker is competent which are outside the somewhat prescriptive nature of a competency system.

In 1995 the Karpin Report was tabled in Parliament, claiming there was a shortage of leadership skills and effective leaders emerging in Australia. The Report detailed a number of recommendations regarding the need for managers and leaders to be developed in Australia and many of the recommendations left the responsibility

of addressing them to corporations. This set a political agenda in motion in the push towards the development of leaders. The Karpin Report on the pending leadership crisis sent reverberations through the corporations, and interventions started to be undertaken to address this critical issue. Training was placed on a national agenda and corporations were forced to rise to development initiatives, with training organisations being established which were corporate, union and government sponsored. Today we see, both in the USA and Australia, that the majority of companies have adopted a competency-based framework for the development of leaders, and research undertaken has confirmed that this is the prevailing platform (Effron, Greenslade & Salob 2005, Corporate Leadership Council 2003, Richards 2008).

The limitation of developing leaders via a competency-based approach

Competency-based leadership development has clearly emerged as a dominant framework, with research in the USA showing that over 85% of companies in that country utilised a competency framework for leadership development (Effron, Grenslade & Salob 2005). However, it has also been suggested in other studies in the USA that having a competency-based framework for leadership development has had limited impact on growing effective leaders (Corporate Leadership Council 2003). In this research, it was discovered that other approaches to leadership development may be shown to be more effective, and the research outlined what they considered were the critical aspects to leadership development ahead of leadership competencies.

It could be argued that leadership is greater than the mix of skills, knowledge and behaviours which competencies were first defined as, and that the essential missing ingredient is 'qualities' (Bernthal & Wellins 2006) for which, I would argue, a competency-based

approach is not entirely able to cater. Writers on management development often separate these two aspects of leadership, and I believe this is due to the fact that leadership is a far more complex set of abilities that extend beyond the technical competence to 'manage' something.

Necessary leadership traits such as integrity and intellectual capability are very difficult to develop and locate within a competency matrix. Research undertaken by the author in Australia also suggests this. Sixty two managers from a large financial institution were interviewed about their own progression to leadership appointment and the way they make appointments themselves. All the leaders interviewed spoke about qualities rather than competencies as the decision points for these leaders when making senior leadership appointment (Richards 2008).

A further study of twelve leaders, drawn from companies listed on the Australian stock exchange, smaller private companies and large public-sector corporations, was also undertaken by the author. The chief executive officers had management responsibility for corporations ranging in size from a workforce of over 4,000 employees to a workforce of about 120 employees. All of them were extremely well remunerated, and a majority of them were male, university-educated and in the 45 to 60 year age bracket. A convenience sampling approach was utilised for this study, and interviews were conducted in 2006 and 2007 across Victoria and New South Wales as part of a pilot study on leadership succession. All twelve spoke at length about what they looked for when appointing a senior leader.

Each interviewee was given a copy of the questions in advance and was offered full anonymity. Questions included:
- What factors did they look for in a person when appointing them to a leadership role?
- How did they assess such factors?

- How did they utilise and value the services of Human Resources in these processes?

One managing director talked about Maslow's Hierarchy of Need as the basis he uses when talking about good leaders and also when recruiting and evaluating if a person would make a suitable leader for his organisation. He spoke at length about how he would evaluate if a person was nearing a state of 'self-actualization' or if they were less secure as a personality and were more focused on survival or self-gratification. The questions that this managing director would ask people in an interview were structured so that he felt he could gain insight into a person's positioning in regard to his interpretation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Need. Another interviewee talked about trust and intelligence being the key characteristics he used when he evaluated leadership potential. These characteristics for effective leadership from the perspective of the interviewees do not appear readily compatible with a competency-based approach to leadership.

It is also notable that in this pilot study, although all senior leaders felt that Human Resources systems had a role to play in an organisation, they did not feel that the leadership development and assessment processes commonly adopted by their Human Resources departments provided valid tools or methods when it related to leadership. One reason for this may be that there are perceived inadequacies which constrain the opportunity to engage with the less tangible, non-technical components of leadership; the result being that ostensibly these leaders made up their own system and criteria. This research is not exhaustive, however, and needs to be further developed to understand more fully the requisite role of Human Resources in leadership preparation.

From this study, for senior leaders outside of Human Resources, competencies are not taken seriously when considering leadership effectiveness, particularly in the context of identification of leadership potential and as criteria for leadership development. In this context,

it is interesting to note that a recent study in the USA found that, although 85% of companies had a competency-based framework for leadership development, less than half of these companies actually used this framework for senior leadership appointment (Effron, Greenslade & Salob 2005).

Other factors to consider when developing leaders

The need for skills to be gained on the job, Lombardo (2000) claims, is critical. It is about mastering a job, not just being competent at it. A number of writers (Cornford 1997, Gonzci 2000) are concerned that there exists too narrow a definition of 'competent', provided by a competency system which emphasises minimal standards of skill acquisition rather than the mastery required by the truly effective leader. Learning to engage people, design a strategy, share that strategy with others and motivate people, are not such straightforward skills for a leader to master easily; there is timing and wisdom gained, which enables this to be achieved and developed (Kellerman 2004).

The Corporate Leadership Council (2003) suggests two major factors for successful leadership development, based on leaders in the business acting as role models, and senior executive commitment to leadership development as a distinguishing factor. The Council (2003) suggests that, if these two factors are not present in a corporation, there is far less probability that effective leaders will emerge in that business, despite the presence of competency systems. Although one could conclude that having leadership competencies in place can assist leadership development, effective role modeling and rewarding desired management behaviours that matter are more beneficial. This leads to the question of what other elements may be needed in order to assess and design leadership education.

McCall (1998) suggests that self-awareness and feedback are important elements in leadership development and that, during the

evaluation and development of leaders, it is critical to gain data from numerous people about how the particular leader is able to lead. This reduces the likelihood of the assessor or educator being manipulated into believing a person is more advanced in leadership skills than they actually are (Hare 2003).

It has been suggested that learning new behaviours is harder for people than learning a new job or technical knowledge (Goleman 2002). Goleman suggests that a person may be high on ability to learn a new job but very low on ability to learn new or more effective behaviours. This clearly differentiates between a competency-based approach to leadership development which sees behaviour as related in a simple linear fashion to skill and knowledge, and other approaches to leadership development which conceive of behaviour as mediated by personality in addition to the other components characteristic of the competency-based approach.

Lombardo (1998) suggests that some leaders are able to perform in a superior way and that these abilities are superior in first time conditions. We know that this success is also indicative of a person's cognitive ability, which, it has been suggested, is an ability a person is born with (Kelner 1991).

This consideration of competencies and qualities prompts the often asked question: 'Are leaders born or made?' According to Goleman (2002), leadership is learnable; Lombardo (1998) would agree with this, as would McClelland (1985) to a degree. Donovan and Jackson (1991) argue that certain aspects of leadership can be taught, but that it is not from a blank starting point. There must be a propensity for leading, and qualities in which to embed enhanced skill, for example, more effective ways of communicating and planning. The view that there needs to be an aptitude for learning and a personality make-up that is conducive to effective and ethical leadership is also supported by research conducted by Hare (2003) and Morse (2004) which suggests that over 25% of chief executives and leaders in the

USA have qualities that lack integrity. Hare's view is that leaders who are charismatic may also be insincere and manipulative, and that often the people with whom they are dealing are not aware of being manipulated. He states that other qualities such as insensitivity, blaming, impatience, unfocused and parasitic behaviours are all important deficiencies to identify when looking for and assessing a potential leader. These attributes may go unnoticed in a narrow competency assessment and a person may be deemed as competent when in fact they would be a poor leader due to the lack of certain desirable qualities. Hare is referring to traits and qualities that are more complex than basic skills, knowledge and behaviour. When examining a company's 'development offering', the Corporate Leadership Council (2003) suggested that educational frameworks rather than psychological diagnostics are the fundamental key to developing leaders. The Council suggested that there does appear to be merit in a competency framework but, if used to the exclusion of all other approaches, such a system may leave a company short on effective leaders. That is, competencies may be a part of the equation for leadership development although certainly not the whole picture.

A key educational challenge – are leaders born or made?

If a key factor in leadership effectiveness is the culmination of more than just skills, then the other 'qualities' that make effective leaders need to be identified in order to understand if these qualities can be developed or not. One interesting perspective comes from an examination of leadership motives. McClelland (1985) has argued that the motives for leaders are not linked to values, and that these cannot be changed. His research suggests that people are either born with their motive (a doubtful proposition) or that it is developed and cemented at a very early age. He suggests that these motives are critical to leadership capability and success, however because they are established at an early age, they are generally thought to be highly resistant to change.

The three prime motivators outlined in his research are the achievement motive, the influence motive and the affiliate motive (McClelland 1985), and each is manifested in a different type of leader. McClelland's research showed that two-thirds of all effective leaders have the influence or high achievement 'driver', however his research does show that an individual's motive must be consistent with the motive of the organisation in order for that person to be a successful leader.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, a person is born with, or develops early, certain key characteristics, such as cognitive ability, motivators and traits. If these are critical in effective leaders, then as adult educators we must ask: can we develop such characteristics if they do not exist or, alternatively, assist in their enhancement once identified as being present in the person we are wishing to develop. If so, where does a competency framework fit in?

Other research in Australia from Richards (2008) also suggests that competencies were not used in leadership appointments in a large Australian institution, despite there being in place a sophisticated competency based framework for leadership development. The phenomenon that this research uncovered for the organisation was the importance of mentors, at the time of a leadership position becoming available,these being more essential to leadership success and sustainability for a leadership post than formal development. Crucially, personality characteristics or qualities, and the fact that these were congruent with the existing leadership's perceived qualities, were valued more highly by mentors than more narrowly assessed competencies. Research in other parts of the world also support such findings (Cranshaw 2006, Corporate Leadership Council 2003, Effron, Greenslade, Salob 2005).

Conclusion – a multi-tiered approach to leadership development?

Leadership development cannot simply be concerned with meeting a standard as prescribed by a competency-based system. Adult educators need to focus on developing leaders' skills and abilities to work within a particular organisation effectively, with that person having the qualities appropriate to that organisation and strategy (Bernthal & Wellins 2005, Effron, Greenslade, Salob 2005). The 'influencing leader' who is able to engage people may come in many guises and the opportunity exists for human resource practitioners and education professionals alike to consider each individual on merit. Adult educators play a key role in showing how educational interventions can help an individual become a better leader, however they are limited by the characteristics of the individual with whom they are dealing and the environment within which that individual operates.

We do not know what the leader of the future looks like nor what the organisation of the future looks like (Florida 2002). The workplace is changing rapidly and so is our society – politically, socially and economically. These factors all mean that leadership is becoming more important than ever. However, they also suggest that the elusiveness of the effective leader appears to be more prevalent, although we would suggest that increasingly, people are looking for 'ethical' leadership by people with the requisite qualities to provide this type of leadership rather than a set of narrowly prescriptive skills and practices coming off a poor character / personality / qualities base. Adult educators need not to stay safe behind a matrix of competency standards and frameworks in the pursuit of a systemised approach to their profession; rather, they should question at each turn the outputs of their work, and how best they can adapt a theoretical base to suit the needs of individuals and organisations.

In this paper I have looked at the general concept of competencies and the framework within which they operate. I have briefly reviewed

research which concludes that a set of competencies across all disciplines is still under review for its effectiveness. I have argued that competency-based systems have migrated over time to include leadership development and I have questioned the validity of this migration.

If organisations want to develop people to be more effective leaders, they not only need a competency-based framework which includes a rigorous educational framework, but also must consider the type of person with whom they are dealing, and design specific interventions that are relevant for that individual in the context of their field of leadership practice.

Developing an individual's traits and abilities may not be entirely possible, and it appears it will not come as a by-product of leadership competencies. I believe we need, with the consent of the individual, an understanding of whole personalities and must design programs appropriate from that knowledge base.

We need to understand what motivates an individual and with this knowledge, combined with their skill set, design a robust educational curriculum for that individual. The goal should be to ensure that individuals coming out of an education process actually meet the outcomes that are required for a particular role, which is what every adult educator seeks.

Leadership development is complex, as is the role of being a leader. In this paper, only certain approaches have been addressed, rather than a comprehensive examination of all methods of leadership development. More research is needed on leadership development on a more empirical basis so that we can understand the suite of tools that may be used in order to address this most critical issue of leadership development.

This new approach may well include a number of theoretical bases coming together –psychological, educational, sociological and anthropological – as a suite of interventions that, when put together, will provide a higher quality of development initiatives for leaders. This may include competencies, but only as a component of a more comprehensive approach. Only with a multi-tiered approach, which is methodologically consistent, will there be any really sustainable leadership development that can bear the scrutiny of robust research in this field.

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The emergence of continuing education in China

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This article reports on continuing education in China. It discusses the emergence of the field in the 1980s, the Chinese characteristics of continuing education, recent developments, and limitations. Continuing education became available in China in the 1980s following a change in government policy and economic reform. It caters mainly for training specialist technicians, although the field has recently diversified to include programs for government officials, leaders of public services, teachers and the general public. Continuing education is increasing in popularity due to the developing economy that demands a skilled workforce. However, several problems and challenges limit the field's development, including inaccessibility (particularly for the general public), out-dated curricula and teaching methods, and limited legislation.