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Following the Leader: The Social Character of Learning in the Australian Army

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Abstract: The complex environments in which modern soldiers operate require high functioning individuals who are able to adapt and apply their knowledge, skills and experience in a variety of contexts. In order to adapt to challenges associated with increasing complexity and take advantage of its various knowledge bases, the Australian Army has pursued a goal of becoming a learning organisation. Drawing on data collected from 20 unstructured group discussions conducted with over 150 Army personnel, this qualitative study explores the significance of leaders (usually commanding officers but also instructors) as 'creators' or 'shapers' of learning environments within their units, and the extent to which they facilitate learning by their staff. Findings suggest that the creation of learning environments (within units) often occurs in an ad hoc manner, reflecting the personalities or dispositions of leaders, rather than reflecting an organisational commitment to 'empowered' learners. Consequently, soldiers' abilities to make and learn from mistakes, ask questions, and display initiative fluctuated according to their posting. However, in contrast to the top-down approach to facilitated learning and empowerment often reported in the literature, findings also suggest that subordinates facilitate learning for leaders. Thus, the paper extends the theory of facilitated learning through leadership by acknowledging the recursive nature of empowerment and the agency of subordinates in shaping their learning environment.

Keywords: Learning Environment, Learning Organisation, Facilitated Learning

Introduction

THE COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS in which modern soldiers operate require high functioning individuals who are able to adapt and apply their knowledge, skills and experience in a variety of contexts. Thus, although a high level of training is required, other methods of individual and organisational learning are needed to equip Australian soldiers for the demands placed upon them in deployment. In order to adapt to challenges associated with increasing complexity and take advantage of its various knowledge bases, the Australian Army has expressed a desire to become a learning organisation (Australian Army, 2007: 1).

This paper explores the significance of leaders (usually commanding officers) as 'creators' of learning environments within their units, and the extent to which they facilitate learning by their staff. The abilities of leaders to foster supportive learning environments have been identified as one of the key building blocks for learning organisations (Garvin et al. 2008). Findings indicate that the creation of learning environments (within units) often occurred in an ad hoc manner, reflecting the personalities or dispositions of leaders, rather than reflecting

an organisational commitment to 'empowered' learners. Consequently, soldiers' opportunities to make and learn from mistakes, ask questions, and display initiative fluctuated according to their posting. In contrast to the top-down view of facilitated learning noted in the literature, findings also suggest that subordinates facilitated learning for leaders. This latter finding suggests a degree of reciprocity in the power relationship between commanding officers and their subordinates, which at times, is at odds with a command and control style of organisational culture which emphasises obedience to authority.

Learning Organisations, Leadership and Learning Environments

A review of the learning organisation literature reveals an overwhelming array of definitions for learning organisations. These definitions often reflect attempts by authors to define the general characteristics and key behaviours of learning organisations. Key individual and organisational behaviours include: a collective willingness and ability to learn (Senge, 2000); a high tolerance for uncertainty and change (Kontoghiorghes et al. 2005); and an overall focus on organisational transformation (Garvin et al. 2008; Pedler et al. 1991). For the most part, definitions tend to focus on the significance of creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge within organisations (Marsick & Watkins, 1996), (or organisational learning) and in relation to this - the facilitation of individual and collective learning (Marquandt & Reynolds, 1994; Senge, 2000); and the modification of behaviour and practices of both individuals and the organisation as a result of learning. Learning organisations are therefore seen as having the ability to undergo a degree of self-diagnosis and change based on reflections on their performance (George & Jones, 2002).

The direct and indirect impact of leadership on learning processes and outcomes (at individual and organisational levels) has been recognised as playing an integral part in creating learning organisations (Garvin et al. 2008; Gerras, 2002; Marsick & Watkins, 1996; Senge, 2000). Whether transformational (Bass, 1990), or otherwise, there is agreement in the literature that the role of leaders in learning organisations is to develop employees (both professionally and personally).

Buckler (1996) contends that effective learning is dependent upon the learning environment, and in particular, the efforts of leaders in creating and sustaining environments where learning can occur. These environments are realised by leaders adopting a facilitative approach to learning and empowerment. Drawing upon Senge's (2000) notion of facilitative leadership, Hitt (1995) regards leaders (usually managers) in learning organisations as being 'organisational designers' who not only create supportive environments where learning can flourish, but also act as 'catalysts' for individual learning within organisations by delegating authority and empowering staff. Garvin et al. (2008) describe supportive learning environments as those where people are not afraid to ask questions, admit to making mistakes, take risks, and are open to new or competing ideas.

Becoming a learning organisation therefore supposes changes in roles of managers and leaders as the organisation becomes more learning and learner-oriented. Indeed, the facilitated character of learning represents a departure from traditional or 'transactional' views of learning (with an emphasis on the teacher and instruction) to a more learner centric view which views learning as a process (Holmes, 2004; Honey, 1998). This view recognises the agency of learners in shaping their learning trajectories. Whatever the case, building a

learning organisation is often seen as a voluntaristic exercise that requires the existence of willing leaders and subordinates to be realised (Filion & Rudolph, 1999).

However, environments can also constrain learning in organisations to the extent to which personnel are often compelled to 'fit in' to the organisation by aligning their cognitive styles with organisational values and beliefs. For example, large traditional-style organisations which strive for consistency, efficiency, obedience and stability (such as Army) can be viewed as being conformance driven employers. Within this context, individual preferences for 'taught' learning styles match the qualities that are espoused within these sorts of organisations. The static nature of this kind of organisation's processes, structure, and culture work to reinforce compliance to organisational norms (Teare & Dealtry, 1998: 3).

Within the discourse of learning environments as presented in the learning organisation literature, we are presented with a somewhat culturally deterministic view of learning and behaviour, particularly in relation to the learning experiences of employees or subordinates within an organisation. The cultural climate 'drives behaviour' (de Somer & Schmidten, 1999: 107) and there is an expectation that people will adapt their behaviour to conform to this environment. Agency is only attributed to leaders and managers who are able to shape or create learning environments through their own efforts. How the environment shapes learning opportunities of leaders is under-explored.

Within the learning organisation discourse we are also encouraged to view the creation of learning environments to be the product of the efforts of leaders who possess specific qualities, traits or characteristics. For the most part, the facilitation of learning is depicted as involving a unidirectional flow of learning, where leaders transfer information over to, or facilitate learning in, 'empowered' subordinates. The ability of staff to facilitate the learning of leaders is mostly ignored. Surprisingly, with all this talk of managers driving change, promulgating a vision and empowering others, the notion of power remains absent from much of this discussion. Filion and Rudolph, (1999) Coopey (1995), and Schein (1999) are exceptions to this rule.

This paper offers an alternative view of the behaviourist and constructivist views of learning presented above. In this paper, learning for both leaders and subordinates alike is viewed as occurring as a result of the interaction between leaders and subordinates, who simultaneously constitute and are constituted by the learning environment and organisational culture. As such, the facilitation of learning reflects the interdependencies between organisational structures, culture, personnel, and ensuing social interaction.

Method

The qualitative study explores the meanings Australian Army personnel give to their learning experiences within their workplace. Data for this study were gathered through the use of a qualitative narrative collection technique known as anecdote circles. The anecdote circle is a research tool that enables the collection of stories, narratives or anecdotes within a group setting (O'Toole & Talbot, 2008). Through this unstructured interview method, anecdotes are collected around broad themes of interest to the facilitator, with new themes introduced by participants.

Data reported here comes from 20 unstructured group discussions conducted with over 150 Army personnel from various sites in Brisbane and Darwin, Australia. Participants comprised of Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers, Regular and Reservist personnel,

and differed according to rank (Private – Lt Colonel) and role (infantry, trade and HQ staff). Groups were relatively homogeneous to allow candid discussion, and were organised around key subjects relating to powerful learning experiences, training and organisational culture. When sharing stories within the group setting, participants were encouraged to provide specific examples of events so as to prevent discussions from being dominated by opinion.

Group discussions were taped and transcribed. NVivo software was employed to assist with the management and analysis of data. The data was sorted into a series of categories and codes. Some of these categories reflected the subjects introduced to the group discussion by the researchers, while others such as leaders as shapers of learning opportunities were introduced by participants. The research met and was undertaken in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Findings

Following the lead of Barber (1992), leadership as described in this paper pertains to the notion of ‘direct leadership.’ Direct leadership usually entails face to face interaction between leaders and subordinates within workgroups, where the leader’s role includes such things as coaching and teaching technical proficiency, as well as motivating staff and fostering cohesion. Leaders in this study are those personnel who enact the behaviours and roles highlighted above, and include Commanding Officers and instructors. Overall, findings reveal that the organisation lacked the systems and processes for the Army-wide generation of supportive learning environments. Instead, the creation of supportive learning environments occurred in an ad hoc manner, subject to the personalities of leaders. Findings also suggest that subordinates were not always passive recipients in the learning process, but also facilitated learning for leaders. The findings reported below reflect the dominant themes relating to leadership and learning generated during data analysis, rather than isolated or individual concerns.

The respondents noted that in some units of the Australian Army, leaders facilitated learning by creating environments where:

- subordinates were encouraged to ask questions, learn from a variety of sources, and display initiative, and
- mistakes were viewed as learning opportunities.

In turn, leaders were able to learn when:

- the organisational culture allowed them to display initiative and viewed their mistakes as learning opportunities, and
- they were receptive to the views of their subordinates.

Asking Questions, Displaying Initiative and Learning Opportunities

Respondents noted how their learning opportunities were often informed by the social context, or the supportive learning environment which characterised their workplace:

... it's the environment you're in. If you're in a very positive environment, and I've had - been in that where I've worked with positive people, and when you've got that positive type of element around you, you will just bloom.

The respondents in this study were generally in agreement that the style and quality of leadership demonstrated in barracks and on deployment had a significant impact on the learning environments within their workplaces. Through the example provided by leaders, participants learned when and where they could ask questions:

I'm not as confident as XXX, but here it's okay to ask questions here. It's okay to say, "Look, this is wrong. What can I do to fix it?" or "Is there somewhere else" – it's okay to do that here. But the previous unit, it wasn't okay to do that.

Asking questions formed part of the learning by doing process, and was a mechanism through which participants gained immediate information about the task at hand. However, the learning culture in terms of asking questions for example, changed from location to location. Concurrently, abilities to ask questions were also informed by leaders within these locations. Respondents noted that their leaders/commanding officers played a vital role in creating an environment where it was permissible to ask questions, or indeed, encouraged this practice so that asking questions was not viewed as a sign of 'stupidity,' incompetence, or weakness:

In the Orderly Room, the Orderly Room sergeant – it wasn't okay if you didn't know remote locality leave or you didn't know air-conditioning allowance, which is part of the clerk's job to process. It was, you were stupid if you weren't aware of these things...So stupidity is – if you asked questions you were stupid.

Abilities to ask questions were also recognised as being informed by one's location within the organisational hierarchy and length of service. In this sense, time in rank and Army (a signifier of status and seniority) gave respondents the confidence to ask questions of those at higher levels within the organisation:

...we've all been - at our rank we've all been around for quite some time so we're not intimidated either to go to a subject matter expert whereas junior people might be intimidated ...whereas we - it doesn't bother us, we've got the experience and the confidence to be able to look at the subject matter experts as well.

Commanders/leaders also facilitated learning through allocating responsibility for specific tasks to subordinates:

Inside the crew... there's a lot more responsibility because well... a crew commander [is] ultimately responsible for the vehicle, but [a crew commander] give it [responsibility] to [the] driver...encourage them to...do something to teach them – and take responsibility for [their] actions.

This allocation of responsibility showed that a commander had faith/trust in the abilities of his/her staff to perform their duties in a competent manner, while also giving subordinates exposure to new learning opportunities. In this instance, the commander empowered subor-

dinates by giving them the freedom to explore new ways of doing things, while allowing them to create their own learning experiences. Empowering employees facilitates learning since control over the direction, flow and process of learning moves away from the manager/leader, so that learning isn't something which is *done* to employees - diminishing the agency of the learner (Ellinger et al., 1999). Thus, the locus of control shifts from managers/leaders to workers/subordinates. In contrast, commanders who repeatedly checked or questioned the behaviour of subordinates undermined their ability to take responsibility for their own actions.

There was also a belief expressed by some leaders however, that younger or new appointees were more inclined to want to be spoon fed information rather than actively seek it out for themselves:

...we tend to force-feed soldiers too much. We take a lot of initiative away from them, by force-feeding them everything about where and what they're to do and so they stop actually thinking for themselves... We want them to develop... great initiative and all that sort of stuff, yes. But we don't create that necessarily in an environment that always allows them to use that initiative because we were so much bombarding them with "You'll do this, you'll do that".

The effect of this over-proscriptive environment was that junior ranks often sought approval or confirmation for intent before acting because of an organisational culture of obedience to authority and rule-following. Through their actions, leaders were *producers* of environments which could either stifle or enable learning. However, the comment above also suggests that leaders are a *product* of a command and control style of organisational culture which stresses obedience to authority and rules. The over-adherence or emphasis on rules, regulations and guidelines stifled initiative in the sense that these rules, regulations and guidelines conveyed that there was only one way, or a correct/preferred way of doing business. Thus, the adherence to rules promoted conformity (for leaders and subordinates alike) rather than empowerment, and as a consequence, favoured more traditional styles of leadership and reduced displays of initiative.

Mistakes as Learning Opportunities

The data elicited from respondents about mistake making, indicates that mistake making is a necessary part of learning in the Army. Through making mistakes, individuals became more able to evaluate different options for action through understanding the cause and effect relationships that become apparent through making mistakes, improving judgment for the future.

For the most part, respondents noted that honest mistakes were viewed as legitimate learning opportunities by leaders:

...you don't learn without making mistakes. I think if you expect people to do what's been always done, then that's great, but you're not going to become a better person for it, or expand the Army's broad knowledge base ...so we (leaders) should encourage it.

I think most of the superiors I've worked with, have always had a fairly flexible attitude which is, okay, you've made mistakes, so long as you can admit to it, I think that people respect that a lot when you say, Look, I stuffed it up, it won't happen again.

The admission of a mistake forms an important part of the learning process as it shifts the focus away from assigning blame towards understanding. This often runs counter to cultural assumptions which equate mistake making with failure, and thus, to be avoided at all costs (Berkun, 2005; Talbot & O'Toole, 2007). Conversely, mistakes which were caused by carelessness or by repeat offenders were not so readily tolerated.

There was little evidence to suggest that subordinates were "shown the door" for demonstrating poor judgement or mistake making. In most instances, however responses to mistake making by commanders tended to be punitive or disciplinary in focus rather than providing staff guidance on how to correct mistakes:

Yeah mistakes are there, but as long as that person is explained where they go wrong, correctly and how to fix it up, it is good. But sometimes you don't see that.

The identification of mistakes is only one component of the learning process. To achieve beneficial learning outcomes, certain corrective actions need also to be identified and implemented. These corrective actions could include things like discussing mistakes with personnel as well as possible options for redressing mistakes, or offering retraining if required.

In terms of the cultural conditions to support the learning of its leaders, there was a consistent view expressed during group discussions that the organisation was becoming less tolerant of mistake making from its leaders. For commanders, over prescriptive directives were viewed as constraining their abilities to not only demonstrate initiative, but more significantly, were seen as placing commanders under considerable pressure to avoid making and reporting mistakes. Furthermore, pressures associated with accountability to government/ministerial departments experienced at the higher level or strategic level headquarters, were viewed as inhibiting opportunities for leaders to 'lead' and learning from mistakes. These pressures were then transferred to lower levels of the organisation.

Other factors which diminished commander's abilities to display initiative as well as make and admit to mistakes, pertained to those processes associated with reporting performance. In this respect, records of performance which highlighted past mistake making were negatively associated with the perceived distribution of rewards (promotional opportunities) and allocation of sanctions (punishment). Avoiding the recording of mistakes therefore acted as a safeguard for promotion.

Subordinates Facilitating Learning by Leaders

As facilitators of learning, leaders are not only required to advocate the importance of learning for the organisation as a whole (by being a conscious and generous provider of learning and development opportunities for staff), they must also demonstrate enthusiasm for learning and development through their own actions and behaviour (Mumford, 1996).

On the surface, evidence of leaders' commitment to learning can be derived through their participation in numerous training courses, and for commissioned officers, education programs designed to provide them with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes to undertake their

duties. When combined with the inculcation of organisational values like courage, teamwork and initiative, this regime of instruction and education assists the (holistic) personal development of leaders and other personnel. It is this focus on the development of personnel where learning can be viewed as a reflexive and ongoing activity. As the following quote from a senior participant alludes:

Now, in the job here at headquarters, I'm still in that validation process. I'm really analysing now, what I've gone through in the last 15 to 17 years of the detailed learning. So, I did XXXX course end of last year, got promoted at the end of the year, so, as far as a soldier goes, I'm at the top of the formal learning. Now, I'm just getting the experience and interaction that fine tunes how a person operates... So I find myself really validating what I'm doing and as well as being more observant of how other leaders are interacting with their subordinates and their peers.

This leader's approach to learning involved reflection, gaining new and 'validating' past experiences, and observing the behaviour of his peers. These (informal) learning approaches were part of the everyday interaction within the headquarters environment and served as a means for 'fine tuning' learning derived from formal training and promotional courses.

Similar to the findings presented by Garvin et al. (2008), data analysis revealed that leaders also demonstrated a commitment to learning through their willingness to consider alternative points of view:

...good officers do ask for advice, you know. I've had brigadiers come up to me, and they'll say, "Why did you do this?" you know what I mean. But what I'm trying to say is that good officers ask questions. And they talk and have good communications with their men. And it goes both ways. So it's just communicating. And if they don't know, ask.

Significantly, alternative points of view, or advice, were often sought from subordinates. Effective commanding officers in these instances were those who drew upon the skills and knowledge of warrant officers and sergeants, as well as privates. Learning occurred through eliciting the ideas of subordinates, or from those who possessed relevant experience and professional knowledge irrespective of rank or status. In this respect, privates could take on the role of the subject matter expert if required:

But the bottom line is that, a bloke who comes in and he doesn't know everything - you just ask. You don't make a [fool] of yourself. You ask someone. You're an officer, and you just ask the corporals or the privates ... you know, "How do we do this?" or, you know, "Can you help us out here?" And I think, really... that's what it's all about. Just ask if you don't know. And officers should - they should ask, because privates...we know our stuff.

The comments above highlight the extent to which power is never total in any social relationship. Here, knowledge creation and expertise is more aligned with experience rather than status, with learning embedded in relationships of exchange. As Marsick and Watkins (1996) suggest, building interpersonal relations between staff and leaders can be equated with facilitating interdependency among team members. In turn, when premised on an egalitarian

ethos underpinning a shared responsibility for learning, this interdependency allows leaders and subordinates to learn from each other.

Discussion and Contribution

Overall, the learning organisation literature paints an overly optimistic view of leaders' abilities to become catalysts for learning in organisations, and use this learning to facilitate change. Facilitated learning is often viewed as being top-down in application, driven by the efforts of leaders in organisations. This paper extends the theory of facilitated learning through leadership by acknowledging the recursive nature of empowerment and the agency of subordinates in shaping their learning environment. Thus, learning occurs through either top-down and bottom-up, or subordinate driven approaches. In the latter case, leaders' commitment to learning was expressed in terms of their desires to seek help/information from subordinates.

Findings also suggest that a supportive learning environment and leadership behaviours that reinforce learning are mutually sustaining ideas. The supportive learning environment provides the social context or space for leadership behaviour. In turn, leadership behaviour helps shape/sustain the supportive learning environment through leaders demonstrating (and encouraging others to demonstrate) behaviours which promote learning. Encouraging subordinates to ask questions and learn from their mistakes was recognised as being an enabler of learning. Indeed, asking questions and making mistakes forms part of the learning cycle. While questioning (asking for clarification or permission) may precede action, mistake making enables learning after action to occur. As the findings in this paper suggest, opportunities for learning are inhibited when this learning cycle is derailed through certain types of leadership behaviour noted in this paper.

The organisation, however, does not just provide the backdrop for learning to occur. Analysis revealed that the behaviour of leaders, like other organisational members, was informed by their location within organisational structures, as well as by cultural cues which favoured rule following and obedience. Thus, although leaders invariably play a crucial role in shaping local learning environments through their own behaviour, the extant organisational culture (expressed in terms of organisational values, expectations and norms of behaviour) must also provide the supportive space for this kind of leadership behaviour to occur. With this in mind, is it reasonable to expect leaders to empower subordinates so as to facilitate their learning, when leaders are feeling disempowered by organisational structures, policies and cultures which stifle their abilities to make decisions, take risks and learn from mistakes? Moreover, if subordinates are empowered to act in autonomous ways, how can commanding officers maintain control within their units? Questions like these suggest future research paths designed to more closely examine the complex relationship between power relations and learning in the Australian Army.

We argue that the complexity and uncertainty that confronts many organisations, including the Australian Army, require practice that is enriched by continual learning to help employees (such as soldiers) to meet increasing and emergent challenges. Indeed, if the Australian Army is to become a learning organisation, the creation of supportive learning environments should not occur in an ad hoc manner (based on the personalities of individual leaders or commanders), but by embedding the duty of leaders to create these types of environments within organisational structures and processes. Finally, this paper contends that there needs to be an

alignment between the organisation's learning ethos (preferably as an integral feature of a learning organisation), and its culture, structures, goals, as well as, actual learning activities if learning is to occur in a systemic manner.

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