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Variations in Perceptions of Leadership Held by IT Executives:
A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Leadership of the IT unit appears to be a critical success factor in strategic planning and implementation of technology by organisations. One moderator of successful leadership seems to be the perception of leadership held by the senior business executives. This work is part of a research project designed to bring the perceptions and practice of leadership into alignment with corporate expectations and needs. . The paper reports on a study in which a semi-structured interview was conducted in a large public service agency to the CEO, his first line reports, the CIO and his first line reports and to key IT managers. A total of 26 interviews were conducted. The results of the interview are analysed using phenomenographical techniques to determine the variation in the variation of perception of leadership between the business executive and the IT executive communities.

Introduction

This study extends the work of Gable and Stewart (1996) and Stewart (1997) in their efforts to shown how expressed leadership style by the IT executive is constrained by the existing relationships between the IT community and the organisation, the organisation's experience with and expectation of IT and organisational culture. A conceptual model relating these variables has been proposed (Gable and Stewart 1996). One key variable in this model was the beliefs of leadership as held by the business executives.

This paper reports on part of a study conducted as part of a three year $200,000 research project funded by the Australian Research Council through their Collaborative research grant scheme. This scheme requires active participation by an industry partner. The industry partner is a large government agency with over 2,000 employees and 8 divisions. It sees itself as a lead agency in management practices and has some considerable successes in implementing large information systems. This agency is participating in this research project as part of their commitment to improving leadership practices within the organisation and more effective use of IT resources.

The issue of leadership beliefs has been raised as a significant variable in restricting leadership practices (Bryman 1993). This study applies phemenography to reveal what these beliefs are. This paper briefly describes phenomenography as a research paradigm and then presents preliminary results from the studies.

Phenomenography as a Research Paradigm

Phenomenography is a research method that attempts to account for the variation in the way aspects of the world are perceived (Marton, 1981, 1986, 1994). Whereas phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of a conceptualisation, phenomenography seeks to establish its variation. Both methods are forms of qualitative research that determines, through analysis of interviews, written text or drawings, the experienced element of a concept in a given context.

Phenomenography seeks to map 'the ways in which people experience, conceptualise and understand various aspects if the world around them' (Marten, 1988a p 178 quoted in Bruce 1994 p5-2). The goal of phenomenography is to reveal the variety of ways that the concept is understood, experienced or perceived. Its output is a classification system of what is actually experienced rather than seeking to confirm a theoretical construction of a phenomenon.

When analysing results phenomenographically, one must discard influences from established theories or one's own perceptions. The data itself is to reveal the underlying structure and meaning. The output of phenomenographical analysis is essentially a classification system including labeled conceptions with a description of its meaning. This classification system may be hierarchical, a web, or disconnected experiences. Some factors in the classification have more significant in certain situations - these pre-eminent factors are called figural elements or the theme while the other elements are called the margin. This aspect of the problem is termed the awareness space. The graphical representation of the conceptions is called the outcome space and its description is called the category of description. The identification of these elements must be directly related to the source textual data as evidence. The key outputs of phenomenographical research is then the set comprising of the categories of description (the referential component), the outcome space and the awareness structures.

The key to understanding the purpose and outputs of phenomenographical research is that the experience of the concept (the conception) is an internal relation between the person (the object) and the concept itself (the subject). This dyad is referred to as the subject-object relationship.

The subject in this research is the person reporting on their experience of leadership. The object of this research is leadership. Note that there are three different roles that can be played here: the subject as a leader; the subject as a follower reporting on the leadership of another and the picture of an ideal leader.

This study examines the subject as a leader in order to determine the implicit leadership theories held by the respondents. Bryman (1993) has critiqued the work of Bass and Avolio (1990) by showing that the results of the quantitative assessments of success used in their Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) may be biased in the direction of these implicitly held beliefs. Some measure of control for these beliefs must be made. An interview was used to determine the beliefs of leadership held by senior executives, and thus control for the inflated results obtained from the MLQ.

Conduct of the Study

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel within the organisation. These personnel include the Deputy CEO (Deputy Director General), the executive directors of each of the divisions (8 people), the IT director and his four key staff, and each of the managers of key IT projects within the organisation. The interviews were taped and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. The interviewees were given a leadership style survey (the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire 5X (Bass and Avolio (1996)) to complete in their own time, as well as an instrument designed to get the respondent's perception of the value of various Information Systems to their business unit.

Respondents were assured of confidentiality. Letters of introduction and the interview questions were distributed several weeks prior to the conduct of the interviews. The project was sanctioned by the IT director and the Deputy Director General. This study follows a pilot study in which three CEO's and five CIOs were given the interview in written form. This pilot study data is included with the extended study in order to understand any underlying variations in perception of leadership by these different communities.

Key documents were obtained that record changes in organisational use of Information Technology. These include steering committee minutes, implementation plans, post-implementation reviews, discussion papers and consultancy reports. The analysis of these documents is directed at categorising the organisation's use of information technology and the perception of that technology by the business executive. The results of that study will be reported in another paper.

This paper concentrates on preliminary analysis stemming from two questions on leadership and one question on relationships between the business and IT communities. This series of questions were used in order to triangulate findings. The leadership questions were:
- Describe a time when you demonstrated that you were an effective leader.
- Describe your complete picture of a competent leader.

Some leaders were uncomfortable in answering the first question. One declined to answer it entirely. Some leaders had prepared answers for the questions, but most had prepared responses mentally. There were no problems raised during the interaction with the interviewer with the questions or the consequential probing. Only one interviewer was used to ensure comparability of results. No more than three interviews were conducted in a day, due to the strain of maintaining concentration during the interviews.

Most interviewees were pleased to participate and were willing to share concerns and anecdotes. Only one was hostile.

The question of most interest was the question dealing with the relationships between the business and IT communities, and differences in perceptions of leadership between these communities. The answers to this question is the current focus of a detailed analysis and only preliminary findings are reported here.

Results of the Study

Anlaysis of the responses to the these questions led to the following preliminary conceptions held by the IT community in the combined study: These people are labeled as CIO or Senior Information Technology Executive for the next level (SITE).

The change agent concept in which leadership is seen as the ability to envision and enable change; e.g.

'*can translate vision into strategies and strategies into action*' File 45 CIO.

Examples of effectiveness include:

'*completed restructuring without consultation ... which would have delayed change and compromised the moves so much that it would negate the benefits*' File 43 CIO

'*Formulating future strategy directions by engaging key staff in the development sage and developing vision setting*' File 45 CIO

'*They articulate vision and ... achieve it*' File 1 SITE

'*Here's a problem that I've identified and I'm actually going to take responsibility for doing something about it*' File 8 CIO

The personal qualities concepts in which leadership is seen as requiring a set of personal qualities as a necessary precursor towards effective leadership; e.g.

'open, honest' File 41 CIO 'open and up-front' P5 SITE
'strength of character' File 43 CIO
'underneath the person was very important values, life values, business values' P5 SITE

The skills viewpoint in which leadership is seen as the utilisation of specific skills in discharging that role; e.g.
'good listener, motivator, negotiator and facilitator' File 42 CIO
'Communicates with people all the time' File 40 CIO, P1 SITE
'shared confidences and [demonstrated] trust in you' P5 SITE

The decision maker conception in which leadership is seen as the ability to make tough decisions and ensure that they are carried out; e.g.
'someone with the ability to make decisions, [and] acknowledge when a decision or approach is not appropriate and be able to suggest a change or withdrawal' File 46 CEO

Effectiveness was demonstrated when
'We had gone down an organisational path of delegation & loose structuring. Some areas were having difficulty coping and aspects of customer service were suffering. Urgent action was needed. In consultation with those affected, I recognised the weaknesses in our approach, and with their help devised & implemented a radically changed approach in a matter of days. Customer service improved immediately & staff morale recovered rapidly' File 40 CIO

Effectiveness was demonstrated when
'Sacking a project manager who refused to align himself with the business unit manager he was supposed to be servicing - even though she was inconsistent & unreasonable most of the time. We couldn't get a win/win with his attitude' File 44 CIO

The orientation conception in which leadership is seen as being task oriented or people oriented as a function of the situation; e.g.
'Someone with an interest in, and a rapport with people, a person whose is able to listen to advise, make decisions, give clear instructions and maintain interest and control of activities - albeit not in an interfering way - and acknowledge a task well done." File 46 CEO
'Someone people want to work for' 'Must respect people' 'Must have ability to set goals for people and measure the progress and failure' File 45 CIO
Leadership is the ability to take organisational goals and make them into meaningful goals to people below .. again to empower them' P1 SITE
'Leadership is a situational thing ' File 8 CIO

This resultant preliminary outcome space requires further analysis of the data in order to determine what factors come into in each node. An detailed analysis of variations in perception of leadership as a function of group (business versus IT) is now underway. These differences can be further distinguished according to the relationships between the parties.

Business View Versus IT View in Leading IT Professionals

IT executives, unless probed, did not think that there were many particular differences in leading IT professionals. Those IT professionals with greater experience in the organisation did report that IT professionals were more task oriented, detail oriented and perfection oriented. These characteristics made it difficult to complete the task quickly as perfection was being sought. IT leaders did report it was difficult to get their staff to focus on solving the business problem rather than the technology problem.

Business unit managers expressed frustration at leading IT professionals. They viewed the IT professional as more focused on process rather than on achieving a business outcome. In particular several reported on the frustrations experienced when asked to commit to a fixed design. They wanted to have more flexibility in achieving the business outcomes rather than be locked into a rigid engineering project. They also expressed frustration at getting the IT executive to appreciate their timelines for delivery. Most reported that products took too long to be approved and to be implemented.

IT View of Leading Senior Business Executives

Analysis of these responses indicate three factors: lack of appreciation of the problem and the solution by the business manager; lack of ownership of the problem by business unit managers and the relationship between the IT professional and the business unit manager.

The lack of appreciation in the problem and the solution reveals itself in the following ways:
'You can see the problem & outline the way to the future but can't lift the management team to see the critical issues (or focus on these)'.File 45 CIO
'[their] lack of direction, lack of IT knowledge' File 41 IO
'They are also well behind in how to take advantage of IT to improve their business scenario' File 44 CIO
'They have a stove pipe view of their division & don't seem to understand the concept of reusing information across the whole organisation' File 44 CIO.

The lack of ownership of the problem itself is manifested as:

As a business person who has become an IT manager, I can see it from both sides - the resistance of the business to take ownership of the opportunities & then apply the resources needed for success. File 40 CIO

The need for an effective relationship between IT and business mangers was revealed in:

The tendency of the IT professional to arrogance, introspection & perfection. Getting the two perspectives to meet, continues to be a challenge. File 40 CIO

Learning the (business) lingo is the most important part of communicating effectively File 43 CIO

Extension to the Study

We are currently completing an analysis of the variations in these perceptions according to group membership: the business community, the IT executive and the IT consultant. These beliefs are being contrasted with variations of leadership style as observed and reported in the MLQ.

Conclusion

This preliminary analysis reveals an hierarchical representation indicates that leadership depends on the base of innate qualities upon which a set of skills are built. These skills translate into particular actions which may focus on decision making, change or alternative focus on people or tasks (the orientation). A detailed analysis of the full study is underway and uses content analysis and Phenomenographical Analysis. This qualitative case study has also revealed concerns about the lateral relationships between the IT executive and the business executive groups. This aspect is being analysed and will be reported elsewhere.

References

Detailed references can be supplied by the author on request (stewart.fit.qut.edu.au).