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## Reflective Learning and the Development of Leaders

**ABSTRACT**

*Investment in leadership development programs continues to rise as organisations struggle to develop leaders at all levels. In this study personal reflections from 40 senior leaders completing an almost year-long leadership development program are analysed using an integrated series of content analysis techniques. In examining a corpus of over 50,000 words, the study presents evidence that the use of reflective learning activities has led to the formation of leadership wisdom: a necessary set of attitudes and values, cognitive skills and life experiences that enable individuals to lead in uncertain environments. The paper concludes that reflection is a cornerstone of successful leadership development programs, and adds value to the discourse on successful leadership.*

**Keywords**: leadership development, leadership and discourse, professional development, qualitative methods

A focus on leadership and leadership development at all levels is key to sustainable organisational performance and employee engagement (Canwell, Geller & Stockton, 2015). As the global economy gathers momentum, organisations are looking to seize opportunities to transform leadership development programs into to a source of strategic strength. A one-size-fits all approach to leadership development cannot address problems for leaders facing a working environment beset with unique complex problems that can never be fully solved. Successful programs require more than a focus on building skills in strategic analysis. In this paper, we illustrate how a focus on personal reflections as a learning activity cultivates wise leaders who integrate attitudes and values, cognitive skills and life experiences to enable balanced decision making.

### LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Leadership is generally understood to be the use of interpersonal influence by those with authority to increase performance in their unit or organisation (Yukl, 2010). This can involve the creation of psychologically satisfying work goals, the development of motivation, and the creation of

an atmosphere conducive for employees to communicate and collaborate as team members (Bass & Bass, 2008).  From this perspective, leaders influence those around them.  People skilled at influencing others typically facilitate better organisational outcomes than those reliant on formal management behaviours alone (Yukl, 2010).

For many, successful leadership has long been an aspiration with myriad leadership models presented in the extant literature.  Developing leaders via professional development programs has been equally well researched.  Success in leader development has been found to depend on a variety of factors including a person's family background (Cox & Cooper, 1988), opportunities in childhood (Yammarino & Bass, 1989), educational background (Avolio, 1994) and personal alignment with the organisation's goals (Schein, 1985).  The value placed by an organisation on leader development has also been found to determine a program's effectiveness (DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012).

While there has been rapid growth in the study of leader development, the need for research exploring the efficacy of specific teaching and learning strategies used in development programs is considered important (Jenkins, 2013).  Research examining leader development highlights how it can be taught using lectures and discussions (Smeltzer & Davey, 1988), role playing (Sogurno, 2003), simulations and games (Allen, 2008), and e-learning and behaviour modelling (Derouin, Fritzsche, & Salas, 2005).  Additionally, action learning (Yukl, 2010), coaching and mentoring (Edelstein, 2001) and feedback tools (Bass & Avolio, 1989) are all used regularly by organisations seeking to build future leaders.  Though these approaches typically aim to broadly enhance leadership skills in a controlled environment, the lack of connection between leader development and 'real work' is considered by Gurdjian, Halbeisen and Lane (2014) as one of the critical reasons why development programs fail.  Gurdjian et al. (2014) suggest that when it comes to planning development programs, '…the ability to push training participants to reflect, whilst also giving them real work experiences to apply new approaches and hone their skills, is a valuable combination …' (p. 4).

Learning activities focussed on personal reflection have been used in a range of disciplines as a method of challenging orthodoxies and stimulating fresh thinking (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Cranton, 2002; Carson & Fisher, 2006; Kuhn, 1962).  Reflection is a process that 'integrate[s] the

understanding gained into one's experience …to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as enhance one's overall effectiveness.' (Rogers, 2001 p.41). Reflection as a specific learning activity in leader development programs is the focus of this research.

The use of reflection as a learning tool in leadership education and development has been well documented (e.g., Burbach, Matkin & Fritz, 2004; Densten &Gray, 2001; Eich, 2008; Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2009). Leadership learning studies specifically advocate reflection as an effective method in promoting continuous learning, and developing a realistic understanding of one's own leadership competencies (see Cranton, 2006; Carson & Fisher, 2006; DeRue, et al., 2012; Fisher-Yoshida 2009; Fisher-Yoshida & Geller, 2009). Continuous learning and reflection as a meaningful way to gain genuine understanding has been described as necessary in the modern leader (e.g. Beinecke, 2009).

Reflection activities typically involve challenging learners to critically assess their deeply held assumptions and how they relate to the wider world (Castelli, 2011). These activities commonly encourage participants to capture their thoughts and experiences in writing (Bolton, 2010; Jenkins, 2013). Reflections integrate the personal experiences of program participants into the instructional design process, thereby seizing the learner's attention, creating relevance, boosting confidence and yielding personal growth (Swanson, 2010). In this learning space, the role of the facilitator becomes akin to that of a coach, mentor, or guide; providing opportunities that stimulate thought and challenge assumptions.

The use of reflection, as an instructional strategy in leader development, is the focus of this study. Written reflections from a cohort of senior leaders were analysed and interpreted to better understand perceived personal growth; and the types of development they experienced on a structured leadership program.

## THE STUDY

Underpinned by the core values of ethical leadership, community service, respect for diversity, and accepting and guiding change; the leader development program which is the focus of

this research, has provided development opportunities, through unique experiences, to over 500 leaders from across the corporate, nonprofit, community, and government sectors, for just over a decade.  As part of the almost year-long program, participants attend regular events which focus on a pre-determined industry-focussed theme (e.g. education, healthcare, the judicial system).  The events can include guest speakers from industry, formal question and answer sessions, discussion forums, site visits, and in-class workshop activities.  Some sessions are scheduled for half a day, some for a full day, and some are immersion experiences over a number of days, in locations away from the program's central location.

After each session, participants are required to complete a structured reflection exercise.  The exercise directs individuals to focus on what they learned about their own leadership practice, including what they would do more or less of, or differently, as a result.  The written reflections are collected via an online program where individuals are able to write as much or as little as they wish about each event.  Completed reflections are submitted within a week of each session.

The practice of collation of written reflections following each session provided a body of data to explore the growth that participants had experienced, and the types of learning, understandings and transformations they had identified in themselves.  Examination of this body of data was conducted independently of the development program provider.

**Data Analysis**

This study examined 40 de-identified personal reflections from a single cohort of senior leaders, spanning approximately 24 events, across one leader development program.  Formal permissions to access the data were obtained from the program provider, participants, and the university human research ethics committee.  Data was provided in text format and was comprised of approximately 400 documents with over 50,000 words in the entire corpus.  A corpus linguistic research approach was employed to better understand the experiences of the cohort of leaders (Morrish & Saunston 2012).  Computer aided qualitative data analysis software was employed to assist researchers to analyse the data in an integrated series of cross referenced stages.

The research team first examined the frequency of words used in the corpus, to reveal particular themes or topics which dominated the reflections.  According to Krippendorff (2013), word counting has a legitimate place in content analysis when it can be related to the meaning of a body of text.  One common way of visualising word frequency is the word cloud (Block, 2009). Block, critiquing word clouds, refers to them as representing a form of 'impressionistic content analysis'. She observes, 'These counts make no scientific claims or inferences; instead, they offer their readers the possibility of unconstrained interpretations, based solely on the assumption that word frequencies mean something' (Block, 2009, p. 38).  Word clouds were used as a way of describing some of the findings in this study, with key parameters including removal of common words such as *the, and, it*.

Because frequencies are in themselves limited in the information that they can provide, two further stages of analysis were conducted.  The first of these was collocation analysis.  In corpus linguistics, collocation analysis examines sequences of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance (Morrish & Saunston 2012).  This process was used to search for patterns in the language used by participants about their experiences.

The second stage of analysis employed concordance plots.  Concordance plots, borrowed from linguistics research (McEnery & Hardie, 2012), record the location of the word or words of interest in the body of data (or corpus lingua) with respect to the time at which they were recorded by the participant, and plots them along a time line.  It is possible to then ascertain when participants more frequently employed these words or terms, and to relate them to the activities taking place at that time.

## FINDINGS

The word cloud (Figure 1) highlights the words most frequently used by participants in the program to describe their experiences.  Those words most frequently used, denoted by their size in the cloud, align with the core aims of the leader development program: to provide participants with opportunities to gain greater leadership knowledge; know the issues and engage with all aspects of the community.

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Insert Figure 1 about here
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From the word cloud and subsequent frequency analysis (see Table 1) the following most commonly used key words were identified: *need*, *will*, *people*, *leadership*, *think*, *work*, *community*, *issues*, *leader*, *make*, *time*, *others*, *change*, *life*.. The most frequent word was *need* which was used almost 300 times by program participants. The focus of this paper is on the findings yielded from the identification of the frequency of participant recordings of the word *need*. This word, its most frequent collocations, and its use over time were used to explore the data further to learn about the leaders' growth during the program.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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Collocation analysis revealed that participants most often reflected on their: *need to do*; *need to be* and *need to think*. Self-awareness was a recurring theme from participant reflections when the *need to be* phrase was examined more closely. Most often the *need to be* phrase focussed on intrapersonal observations (i.e. need to be more myself); but also articulated needs for certain types of behaviour (i.e. *need to be*: *prepared, clearer, assertive*).

Participants who used a *need to think* phrase in their reflections focused on identifying areas for future knowledge development regarding personal behaviour change linked to communication, skill utilisation, values-based decision-making; and innovative considerations when problem-solving. In almost every instance where participants used the *need to do* phrase, they identified that they *need to do more* - more collaborations, more creating of time, more belief in self, and more listening and engaging with others.

The reflections on *need* in the program appear to have a dual focus: as a compass in the sense of navigating the participant into new, as yet uncharted, self-discoveries; and as a beacon allowing participants to negotiate these inner discoveries in relative safety. This sense of journey is reflected in the distribution of the word *need* in the concordance plot (see Figure 2). Each line in the plot represents the word *need* from the beginning to the end of the program.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Across the period of the program, the frequency with which the word *need* was used varied. As can be seen in Figure 2, in the initial stages of the program, *need* was heavily used by participants in their reflections.  *Need* was used less over time as the program progressed, and then not at all towards the very end.  The level of concentration of *need* statements at the beginning, middle and end of the program was examined to better understand the experiences of the participants when they reflected on *need*.

At the commencement of the program comments such as the following were common:

> *The main learning that I took out of this session is I need to reflect more*
> *It [the session] reminded me that I need to be mindful …..*
> *I need to reflect on the nature of my work life and home life balance …..*

The reflections suggest that participants at the beginning of the program 'learn' to become more self-aware.  These comments also show participants actively engaging in the reflection process both as part of the formal program and also as part of their own personal development outside the program.

During the middle phases of the program, comments such as the following were used:

> *This experience has led me to conclude that I need to broadcast my ambition a little more broadly, both at work and in non-work situations….*
>
> *I don't believe I need to change my leadership practice*
>
> *The greatest insight was the fact that whilst I don't need to know everything, as a leader I do need to be confident in my own abilities and have a good sense of self.*
>
> *This seminar highlighted the need to work further on this area and my potential to further develop.*

During this part of the program it was evident that participants started to acquire knowledge and make judgements about their leadership practice and engage with this insight.  These reflections highlighted intentions or intrapersonal actions as part of leader development.  Here the evidence from the concordance plot is that participants also started to reflect on fewer and fewer *needs*.

In the final reflections, participants moved away from a focus on the intrapersonal thinking and moved to those that focussed on interpersonal connections and extrapersonal relationships. They commented:

> *That to be a great leader you need to have people in your life that support you in all different ways. In helping you when you feel down, keeping you grounded and making sure you always try to be a better person. That allows you to try to do that for others.*

> *I think as leaders it is our responsibility to think creatively and strategically about the future and ensure through our actions and conversations that others do too. It is clear that the world is changing rapidly and we need to continue to change and adapt to remain a prosperous State.*

The focus on *need* in the reflections highlighted three key features. The first of these was that participants were not only engaging in reflective practice - the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning - but also in reflexive practice, critically examining their assumptions underlying actions, the impact of those actions, and from a broader perspective, what passes as good management practice. The second feature was that participants had cognitively engaged with the learning during the sessions and in some instances there was evidence of metacognitive skills (i.e. thinking about thinking) being developed (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). The third feature was that participants' personal *need* appeared to become less prominent and needs in relation to others were more evident over time. Relationships with others, and the emotional or affective aspect of those relationships for the self as a leader, and on those around the leader, were evident as part of the reflections.

These three features in the data align with the work of Ardelt (2003, 2004) on wisdom. In conceptualising wisdom Ardelt (2004) argues that it is realised 'through a reflection on personal experiences that transform an individual in the process' (p. 260). In operationalising wisdom, Ardelt (2003, 2004) contends that it is a three-dimensional personality characteristic made up of cognitive (mental abilities), reflective (perceptions of self and others from multiple perspectives) and affective (feelings and attitudes) elements. The corpus of reflections supports Ardelt's view that 'The simultaneous presence of cognitive, reflective and affective personality characteristics is necessary

but also sufficient for a person to be considered wise' (2004, p. 278).  Figure 3 (below) illustrates the

association of the features in the data with those in Ardelt's three-dimensional model.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Wisdom is an elusive concept that is very difficult to define (Sternberg, 1990), and has been

variously described as the careful consideration of multiple factors when making social judgements

(Webster, 2003), an interplay of creativity, curiosity and open-mindedness (Peterson & Seligman,

2004), and the activation of factual and strategic knowledge to address practical and uncertain life

challenges (Bass & Bass, 2008).  Wisdom has been most comprehensively described by Sternberg

(1998, p.347) as

> *the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a*
> *common good through a balance among multiple (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c)*
> *extrapersonal interests in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing*
> *environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments.*

It is the integration of a set of specific attitudes and values, cognitive skills and life experiences that

form wisdom and lead a person to be wise.  Evidence from this study supports the formation of

leadership wisdom in the program participants.

This study found evidence supporting Ardelt's (2003, 2004) contention that a purposeful

focus on reflection as a learning activity through the assignment of set tasks stimulates the

development of the cognitive and affective elements of wisdom and enables those involved to make

meaning of events; particularly those which relate to intrapersonal and interpersonal matters.  The

understanding of reality (cognitive) and the sympathy and compassion for others (affective) as

iterative outcomes of the practice of reflection (reflective) all have to be present for a person to be

considered 'wise' (Ardelt 2003).  The findings of this study support this view, and affirm the use of

reflection as a learning activity in the formation of leadership wisdom.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has outlined an evidence based analysis of written reflections of senior leaders who participated in a leader development program.  It contributes to the addressing a need for greater in-depth research exploring the types of strategies for teaching and learning leader development within the broader leadership studies discipline (Jenkins, 2013).

Contemporaneous written reflections gathered from participants over the course of their program provided a body of evidence for examining the contribution of reflection to the process of leader development.  This research supports the view that the specific integration of reflection in leader development programs provides an opportunity for individuals to evaluate the significance of their experiences from a leadership perspective (Densten & Grey, 2001).  The role of reflection in the development of self-awareness, particularly in relation to thinking about the self (intrapersonal), the self in relation to others (interpersonal) and the interactions between the self and others (extrapersonal); and the link to Ardelt's wisdom elements is strong in the data.  The corpus analysed supported that reflection is central in encouraging the cognitive and affective elements of wisdom as presented by Ardelt (2003), and that reflection as a core, organised and supported learning activity, should be considered in leader development programs seeking to cultivate wise leaders.

This study has a particular strength to recommend it.  Often graduates of a particular leader development program, and those who facilitate them, promote their programs based on personal testimonials, and on the personal beliefs of those whose skills are employed to deliver them.  It is often difficult to obtain independent evidence of the efficacy of programs because of the personal nature of development.  This paper has presented evidence independent of graduates and/or facilitators, a key strength of the present research.

This research however, has not presented evidence as to the potential influence of demographic features (i.e. gender, age, educational background etc.) may have had on individual experiences of the sessions or on their reflections.  Access to the type and volume of data in this study is unique, and anonymity of participants was a critical condition of access to the corpus.  The access that was granted enabled independent investigation of the role of reflection as a learning activity; and this adds value to the discourse on leaders and leader development.

The positive psychology movement led by Martin Seligman (2012), has raised awareness of wisdom as a key domain of personal strength.  Such personal strength in leaders is considered imperative as complexity and uncertainty in decision making increases; as commercial opportunities compete with ethical decision making; and as short-term pressures overtake the focus on long-term goals.  From a leader development perspective, the reflection process provides the opportunity of time to think about thinking in an environment that values short-term solutions and speed of response. This opportunity is considered the competitive advantage of leader and professional development programs that engage with, and encourage, reflection.

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Figure 1 Frequency word cloud – leader development reflections.

Table 1: Top 12 most frequently used words

| Word | Count |
|------|-------|
| *Need* | 296 |
| *Will* | 289 |
| *People* | 276 |
| *Leadership* | 252 |
| *Think* | 181 |
| *Work* | 173 |
| *Community* | 146 |
| *Issues* | 142 |
| *Leader* | 135 |
| *Make* | 127 |
| *Time* | 126 |
| *Others* | 124 |

**Concordance Hits**   296                **Total Plots**   1

HIT FILE: 1    FILE: LWA focus question all experiences for qual analysis 2.txt
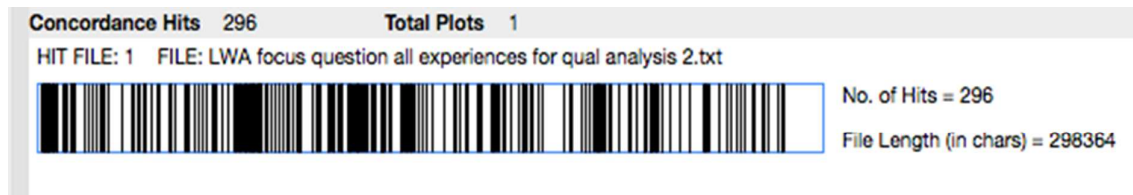
No. of Hits = 296

File Length (in chars) = 298364

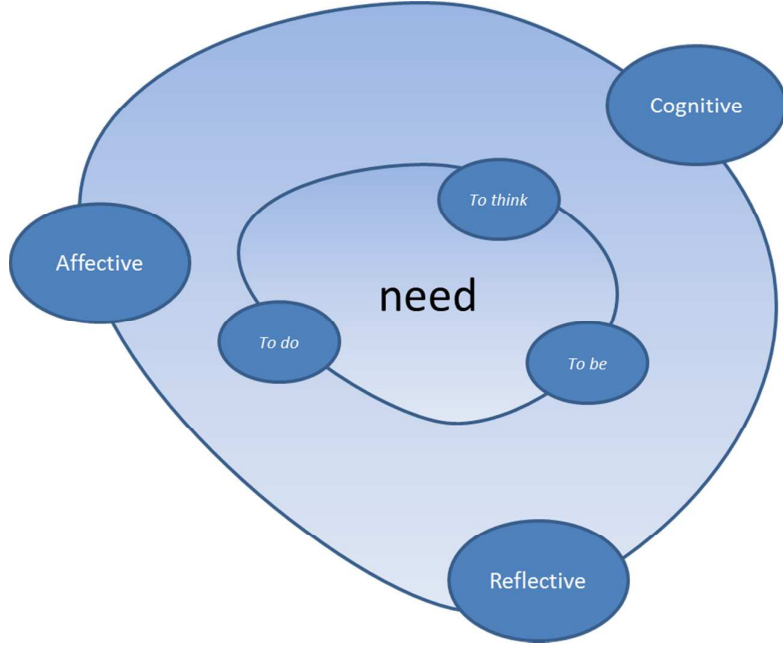Figure 2. Concordance plot – Use of the word *need* over time.

Figure 3: Alignment of features in the data with Ardelt's (2003) three-dimensional model of wisdom.