

Lifecycles and leadership: partnerships for VET

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Abstract

Research by the Centre for Research and Learning in Rural Australia (CRLRA) has identified the process involved in implementing initiatives in VET partnerships. Essentially, the process begins with a *trigger* stage, which relates to the identification of a problem or opportunity for change that impacts on, or is likely to impact on the parties that go on to become partners. This is followed by *initiation*, in which informal processes come into play in order to mobilise partners' resources to address the problem or opportunity. Next comes *development*, which relates to the implementation of formal processes, such as committees, to tackle the problem or develop the opportunity. In the fourth stage, the gains are consolidated through the *maintenance* of the linkages. Processes and resources are put in place to facilitate the effective management of the linkages. In the *management and sustainability* stage, the partners review and renew their vision and goals and scan for opportunities and new problems in relation to the partnership. Different aspects of collective, or group skills and resources (or social capital) are drawn on at different stages of the process.

The model of this process is viewed as emerging and will be tested in subsequent research.

In previous projects, CRLRA found that the ingredients for success of partnerships vary according to the context, the resources available to the collaborative effort, the organisations involved and their goals. This paper explores the aspects of collective, or group skills and resources, or social capital, that are drawn on at different stages of the process that partners use in collaborative VET initiatives for the so-called new world of work. It also examines processes used in new VET partnerships, such as those required in new, or emerging industries, compared with mature partnerships. Emerging industries have different contexts from mature industries, and less established cultures and working relationships around VET.

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Introduction

The role of leadership in the new economy is currently the subject of keen debate. It is widely recognised that a new kind of leadership is required in the contemporary and volatile social and economic conditions of a local-global era. Terms such as ‘organisational agility’ are metaphors that capture the need for flexibility and timeliness in response to changing circumstances, a point underlined by recent events in the USA. What are the attributes of leadership in such mercurial times? How can a new era of VET leadership specifically enhance organisational, employment, community and individual trainee needs? This paper synthesises the research findings from CRLRA projects to show the ways in which leadership processes draw differentially on human and social resources during different stages of the leadership cycle to contribute to achieving and sustaining innovation, internationalisation and new technologies.

Literature on leadership

Barker (1997) summarised the three main schools of thought regarding leadership, namely leadership as: an ability, a relationship or a process. The traditional leadership paradigm viewed leadership as an *ability* (or set of traits or behaviours) possessed by certain individuals or ‘leaders’. This view was popular with leadership trainers because the leadership act could be reduced to a series of steps that could be taught. Barker (1997) considered this view of leadership to be based on confusion between management and leadership, and suggested that ‘[w]hen we think of the ability of leaders, we are probably thinking of the ability of leaders to manage’ (p. 6). He distinguished between management, which creates stability, and leadership, which creates change, arguing that management can be viewed as a skill or set of behaviours, while leadership deals with uncertainty and the unknown and cannot be viewed in this way. However, it is recognised that people in formal leadership roles (for example, TAFE CEOs) engage in both management and leadership activities.

The view of leadership as a *relationship* emphasises that it is the result of interaction between people. Rost (1993, p. 99) conceived of leadership in this way, as ‘an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes’. An important element of leadership, according to this view, is that both leaders and collaborators bring resources to the relationship that are useful for accomplishing their intended changes (Rost 1991). The relationship is multi-directional and not coercive. However, leaders are separated from collaborators by the possession of power resources that allow them to exercise greater influence (Rost 1991).

According to Barker (1997), the third view of leadership is that of a dynamic and collaborative *process* in which leadership roles are not clearly defined. This view represents a move away from the traditional leadership paradigm, in that it shifts the focus away from the role and influence of a designated ‘leader’ towards a concept of leadership as a group process. Through the leadership process, which involves influencing, compromising and sacrificing, a new, shared vision of the future is gradually developed to

reflect the collective needs of the group (Barker 1997). Leadership is thus the name given to the process through which individuals and groups interact and collaborate to achieve a shared vision. This concept of leadership challenges thinking about traditional leadership practices and training. There are several sub-groups of theories in this cluster:

Participative leadership de-emphasises visible top-down hierarchies and detailed scripts that program what followers must do. It stresses the decision-making processes of the group (e.g. Leithwood & Duke 1999).

Learning leadership centres on the leader's fundamental or core values (O'Toole, 1995) and could be summarised as learning (Dixon, 1994). It arises from a re-analysis of the dramatic change we all face, including, as Howard Gardner (1995) argues, the possibilities of immediate or gradual world destruction, new forms of instant communication, the demise of privacy and the increased politicisation of public enterprises.

Enabling leadership (Falk & Mulford 2001) has emerged more recently as a contemporary leadership theory and construct. Enabling leadership puts the focus on the leadership processes themselves as implicated in a specific event related to strategic change. Leadership is not seen as the exclusive domain of one person but rather as a jointly-owned, or collective, approach to managing a specific set of events identified by a common purpose. Rather than any single individual's vision, the unit of analysis is the specific leadership event or intervention and associated shared envisioning activities.

Research concerned with *Enabling leadership* has grown from two imperatives: first, the lack of a body of leadership research that is Australian and based on Australian vocational education and training sites and data; and second, calls for a new kind of leadership for new times that have failed to clarify the empirical scope of such a concept. In his introduction to an important summary of issues and challenges facing community leadership for the 21st century (in Peirce & Johnson 1997), Gardner highlights some of the main requirements for leadership under the new circumstances:

What we need, and what seems to be emerging in some of our communities, is something new - networks of responsibility drawn from all segments, coming together to create a wholeness that incorporates diversity. The participants are at home with change and exhibit a measure of shared values, a sense of mutual obligation and trust. Above all, they have a sense of responsibility for the future of the whole city and region (p. vi).

Gardner sees leadership as multi-faceted and about a situation rather than the characteristics of 'a person'. Leadership is not approached with a view that 'this is the right way to do the job'. Rather, action is situated in a particular moment and location with particular needs and planned outcomes, such as *enabling* others (e.g. by connecting them to one another, to information and to their community). Each situation will require specific leadership needs, planning and outcomes. The nature of the situation or context will largely determine the type and extent of enabling leadership that is involved.

Social capital and leadership of partnerships

A social capital framework (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, Woolcock & Narayan 2000) is proving to be a useful tool for analysing the leadership process for VET partnerships. Social capital refers to the 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups' (OECD 2001, p. 41). It allows people (communities) to combine their skills and knowledge in order to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

The role of social capital in realising human potential is supported by recent research (OECD 2001, Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, Woolcock & Narayan 2000). Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) conceive social capital as two kinds of resources that people bring to interactions intended to result in action for mutual benefit. These are termed knowledge and identity resources. *Knowledge resources* are knowledge of who, when and where to go to for advice or resources and how to get things done. They relate to networks and an understanding of procedures and how people work effectively together, including an understanding of others values and attitudes. *Identity resources* are related to different roles required for operating effectively in different or new situations. People must first of all be able and willing (committed) to act for the benefit of the community and its members. Identity resources also include self-confidence, norms such as reciprocity, and values and visions that are shared between the parties to the interaction.

Opportunities to interact are important because they not only allow people to use their social capital for mutually beneficial actions, but also facilitate building or strengthening community social capital. The quality of the outcomes possible from interactions depends on the quality of the social capital resources that are used.

Leadership for VET partnerships

Six years of research into the dynamics that enhance the role of vocational education and training in regional Australia (e.g., CRLRA 2000, 2001) has resulted in a body of findings about the factors that contribute to successful, high quality vocational education and training. These factors concern the dynamics of collaboration and partnerships, including leadership, and aspects of the community processes that impinge on successful VET outcomes. Worthy of note is that VET is ‘owned’ (and its nature, provision and outcomes are driven by) a range of stakeholders in communities and not by ‘industry’ alone, as has been the emphasis in policy for some years now. These stakeholders drive the quality of VET outcomes in any region, and it is demonstrable that these outcomes are vastly superior when stakeholder sectors collaborate in quality partnerships.

CRLRA research into enabling leadership (e.g., CRLRA 2000, Falk & Mulford 2001) identifies the following key qualities of interactive processes involved in leadership that foster positive learning of knowledge and about identities, and so contribute to enhanced social capital (networks and relationships) and collective action by partnerships:

- *Building internal networks:* Are the relevant knowledge of skills, knowledge and shared or congruent values present for the purpose in hand?
- *Building links between internal and external networks:* How healthy are the links between the internal and external networks in the community being built and maintained?
- *Building historicity:* How effective is the building of and on shared experiences (including norms and attitudes) and understandings of personal, family, community and broader social history?
- *Building shared visions:* How systematic and inclusive of knowledge and identity resources (including norms, values and attitudes) is the reconciliation of past shared experiences with the desired future scenario/s?
- *Building shared communication:* How explicit and systematic are the communicative practices concerning physical sites, rules and procedures?
- *Building each other’s self confidence and identity shifts:* How explicit and systematic are the opportunities where these interactions occur?

The role of leaders is seen to be one of negotiating shared values and developing trust (Fukuyama 1995, Greenleaf 1996). For example, the building of networks relies for its success on building trust between the network members, which is a clear leadership role (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). Likewise, building trust between people as they share communication is fundamental to successful outcomes. Shimeld (2001) notes that a leader who talks of partnership but demonstrates competitive, combative behaviours “diminishes broad stakeholder input, reduces the store of social and skill capital, and jeopardises future collaborative activity as partners realise they are tokens in a ‘partnership game’ and withdraw their support, energy and good-will” (p.1).

About the projects

This paper analyses themes from two recent research projects. *More than an education: Leadership for rural school-community partnerships* (Kilpatrick et al forthcoming), funded by the Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation, employed a case study design to investigate the ways in which five very different rural schools contribute to their communities, beyond the education of young people. *Leadership in vocational education and training: leadership by design, not by default* (Falk & Smith forthcoming), funded by National Centre for Vocational Education Research, collected data from twelve VET providers in all States to investigate the relationship between effective VET leadership and the context of that leadership. Readers interested in the full findings and details of the methodologies are referred to the project reports.

Leadership interventions

Most of the partnerships reviewed in *More than an education* that form the basis of the discussion on leadership, relate to the planning and implementation of specific programs linking school to community, such as the development of a VET-in-schools program, a community online access centre or an environmental project. As outlined above, leadership is primarily concerned with bringing about change, while management focuses on managing change (Barker 1997). Each linkage between the partners, in this project school and community, can be viewed as a leadership intervention. The *More than an education* and the *Leadership by design, not by default* projects arrive at the same conclusion about the leadership process; the importance for successful VET outcomes of focusing on the leadership *intervention* – those activities defined by a particular VET event connected strategically. The stages, and related leadership requirements, of these interventions were also identified. The leadership process can be viewed chronologically as four stages:

1. *Trigger stage*, which relates to the identification of a problem or opportunity for change that impacts on, or is likely to impact on the parties that are, or go on to become, partners.
2. *Initiation stage*, in which informal processes come into play in order to mobilise partners’ resources to address the problem or opportunity.
3. *Development stage*, which relates to the implementation of formal processes, such as committees, to tackle the problem or develop the opportunity.
4. *Management and sustainability stage* involves the maintenance of the linkages through processes and resources that have been put in place. These activities occur often simultaneously with the sustainability (*not* stagnation) of the leadership intervention outputs and outcomes. The partners review and renew their vision and goals and scan for opportunities and new problems in relation to the partnership. Different aspects of collective, or group skills and resources (or social capital) are drawn on at different stages of the process.

Table 1 below illustrates the four stages by analysing leadership interventions: in this example the establishment of a VET-in-schools programs in three communities. Note that the process involves a number of different leaders at different stages. The partners here are the schools and communities, including their business and industry sectors.

Table 1: the 4 stages of leadership interventions in the establishment of VET-in-schools (VIS) programs

Stage	VET-in-schools program linkage A		VET-in-schools program linkage B		VIS program linkage C	
	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process
<i>Trigger</i> (problem/ opportunity identification)	2 teachers	identified need involved Principal	Oyster grower	identified opportunity approached Principal	VET Coordinator BEC Facilitator	identified opportunity that fitted with school philosophy and new direction for BEC approached Principal
<i>Initiation</i>	Principal and 2 teachers	openness to new ideas and willingness to take risks support of Principal for idea Principal empowers people to follow through with their ideas accessing external networks for information involving community opinion leaders building on existing internal networks developing vision	Principal and Deputy Principal Oyster grower	openness to new ideas and willingness to take risks support of Principal managing process of reconciling competing values and shaping values appropriate to vision inclusive, involving all stakeholders, including youth building on existing community attitudes and values using community networks	VET Coordinator BEC Facilitator Principal	openness to new ideas and willingness to take risks support of formal school leadership recognising common purpose of school and community

Table 1 continued:

Stage	VET-in-schools program linkage A		VET-in-schools program linkage B		VET-in-schools program linkage C	
	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process	Leaders	Skills and resources used in leadership process
<i>Development</i>	2 teachers community opinion leaders Principal	locating and accessing resources gaining trust and support of stakeholders coming to share the vision, especially with employers deliberate inclusive community involvement working with external stakeholders formalisation of partnership	Aquaculture Committee (community, not school, were the leaders)	inclusive community involvement on Committee locating resources looking to others with similar experiences (another School) matching community leadership and management style (by committee) with project management style	VET Coordinator BEC Facilitator VET Committee	accessing funding using external networks gaining trust and support of stakeholders involving all stakeholders formalisation of process empowering people to follow through with their ideas coming to share a standard of excellence
<i>Management and sustainability</i>	Management Committee VET Coordinator	on-going liaison between stakeholders (business, Indigenous communities, students) through Management Committee continued high level of commitment by stakeholders looking for new opportunities (school-based apprentices)	Aquaculture Committee (community, industry and school) Aquaculture Liaison Officer Principal	communication and linking working with diverse internal and external stakeholders reaffirming networks and goals scanning for new opportunities and problems re aquaculture seeking and acting on feedback from stakeholders	VET Coordinator Employers Principal	empowering all stakeholders to take control rather than Management Committee collaborative problem solving looking out for threats and opportunities

A discussion follows of the aspects of skills and resources that are drawn on at different stages of the process used by partners in collaborating around VET. In this, Falk and Kilpatrick's (2000) framework of social capital as knowledge and identity resources is used as an analytical tool.

At the *trigger stage* people had to be able to identify opportunities (in some cases through networks external to the community) and to be aware of the vision and/or values of the partners (school and community). They had to be willing to act to advance their idea and needed to know how to achieve it. In the examples given, this meant involving the Principal, who had the power to access resources. This stage draws on both the knowledge and identity resources of networks.

The *initiation stage* saw leaders using social capital resources in the form of existing networks, both partner and external (knowledge resources). Involving key players and opinion leaders they demonstrated a knowledge of how to get things done. Leaders also built social capital by facilitating the development and sharing of visions and values among the individuals who made up the school and community partners, drawing on and building identity resources.

The *development stage* saw further use and building of social capital resources as the partners learnt new ways of acting collectively, often via committees. Networks of the various players in the leadership process were accessed, but most importantly the number of players in the leadership process increased through the deliberate involvement of others by school Principals and other early stage leaders. Newly involved leaders developed a shared language and understanding of each other's points of view, as well as an understanding of how to work together.

The leadership process, as distinct from management, was seen at the *management and sustainability stage* as the players scanned for new problems or opportunities that could be moulded to fit the vision of the partners. This scanning uses similar social capital resources to the trigger stage, except that the social capital resources have been strengthened through the partnership. The capacity of the partners to respond to opportunities and threats has been enhanced.

Evidence from both the *Leadership by design, not by default* and *More than an education* projects, then, shows that leadership in VET is a process that can be seen as a series of leadership interventions, or a series of linkages between partners. This raises the question of what happens over time as partners work together on various linkages. The next section describes what the research tells us about leadership and partnership lifecycles.

Leadership and partnership lifecycles

Ferrier, Trood and Whittingham (forthcoming) describe the place of VET (or lack of it) in research and development related partnerships in a range of emerging and more mature industries. Kearns et al (1996) suggest that industry-provider partnerships have a lifecycle. Adapted from Kanter (1994), the cycle has three phases. The start up phase; the developmental phase; and the mature partnership phase. CRLRA's *More than an education* project finds a similar progression from early- to late/mature-stage in partnerships between rural schools and their communities, including partnerships around VET programs. The *Leadership by design, not*

by default and *More than an education* projects analysed leadership processes from partnerships that had been established for varying lengths of time and were at different phases of the partnership lifecycle. While it is clear that a similar process operates at all phases of the lifecycle, there are some differences in the operation of the leadership process in partnerships at different stages of maturity.

The *More than an education* project found that communities and schools which share the belief that education is the responsibility of the whole community and that work together, drawing on skills and knowledge of the community as a whole (including its business and industry sectors) experience benefits that extend far beyond producing a well-educated group of young people. However, the level of maturity of the school–community partnership dictates how schools and communities go about developing and sustaining new linkages, or interventions. For example, key players in the leadership process tend to adopt a more directive and initiating role in developing school–community partnerships in communities which do not have a strong history of working together (that is, in communities at the early stage of developing school–community partnerships), compared with the more facilitative role adopted by key players in schools and communities with well-developed linkages. This indicates that there is no ‘one size fits all’ process for developing effective partnerships. Rather, the leadership process is situational, as the *Leadership by design, not by default* project found. It must take into account issues such as the partners’ history of working together, the availability, capacity and willingness of people to play a role in the leadership process, and the nature of the problem or opportunity that is driving the linkage or intervention.

Table 2 summarises some of the key characteristics of effective school–community partnerships that are transferable to other VET partnerships, including effective leadership. It takes into account other linkages studied in the project *More than an education* and draws on findings from the three sites presented in Table 1, as well as findings from the two other sites that formed part of the study. As noted above, however, the nature and extent of these characteristics differ according to the level of maturity of the school–community partnership. The table is intended to be read from left to right and from top to bottom, as it represents a continuum of development from early to mature partnerships. The three VET program linkages are from sites that represent early to mid, through mid to late, and late stage (but not mature) partnerships between the school and community.

The Table shows that there are variations in the balance of activity of leaders from the two partner groups (school and community in this example) according to the level of maturity of the partnership. In the mature stage the school is almost subsumed into the community – the partners think and act as one.

Table 2: The key characteristics of effective school-community partnerships

Level of maturity of partnership		
Early	Mid	Mature
Initiation of linkages or interventions		
Most linkages initiated by school	Linkages initiated equally by school and community	Most linkages initiated by community
Extent of school's knowledge and use of community resources		
Building a knowledge base; uses community resources	Adding to a well established knowledge base; uses and values community resources	Extensive knowledge base within and outside community; extensive use of community resources. Community proactive in learning of school
Decision making in school–community partnerships		
Decision making weighted towards school	Shared decision making between school and community	Decision making weighted towards community
Match between level of community empowerment and leadership processes for partnerships		
Community used to direction from others; leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror this	Community starting to take control of its own future; inclusive leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror and contribute to level of community empowerment by developing capacity to establish and utilise external links	Community controls its own future; leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror and contribute to level of community empowerment by further developing community capacity
Extent to which vision for school–community partnership is shared		
Vision still belongs to formal school leaders	Vision shared between school and community	School is part of the community's vision
Extent to which school–community partnerships exhibit risk taking and ability to mould opportunities		
Low level of risk taking and opportunity moulding	High level of risk taking and opportunity moulding	Medium to low level as school and community reap the benefits of past risk taking and opportunity moulding activities
Extent to which community members see themselves as valuable learning resources		
Community resources used, but no evidence see themselves as valuable learning resources	Some community members see themselves as valuable learning resources	Community members proactive in learning of school and community

Characteristics or indicators of the leadership process that are central to the success of school–community partnerships follow from Table 2. The indicators specify roles for school Principals, schools as a whole (Principals, teachers, other staff members, School Councils, parent bodies and students) and community (community leaders, business, industry and other community members). The indicators, listed below, are largely sequential in that later indicators build on earlier ones. The research found some special roles for formal educational leaders, in this case school Principals. School Principals are able to legitimise school-community partnerships through the power and authority that is attached to their formal position.

The list here selects from the project report those indicators that are transferable to other educational and VET leadership contexts. ‘Institution’ or ‘provider’ could be substituted for ‘school’. ‘VET manager’ could be substituted for ‘School Principal’. Community is already defined to include business and industry. Indicators of an effective leadership process for educational partnerships include:

- *School Principals* are committed to fostering increased integration between school and community.
- *School* has in-depth knowledge of the community and resources available.
- *School* actively seeks opportunities to involve all sectors of the community, including those who would not normally have contact with the school.
- *School Principals* display a transformational leadership style which empowers others within the school and community and facilitates collective visioning.
- *School* and *community* have access to and utilise extensive internal and external networks.
- *School* and *community* share a vision for the future.
- *School* and *community* are open to new ideas, willing to take risks and willing to mould opportunities to match their vision.
- *School* and *community* together play an active, meaningful and purposeful role in school decision making.
- *School* and *community* value the skills of all in contributing to the learning of all.
- Leadership for school–community partnerships is seen as the collective responsibility of *school* and *community*.

Underscoring these indicators of effective leadership processes for educational partnerships is the importance of collective learning activities including teamwork and network building, which have been identified elsewhere (OECD 2001; Falk & Kilpatrick 2000) as key social capital building activities.

Summary and conclusion

Finding out more about leadership, its existing body of research and scholarship and its associated conceptual elements, has provided a strong motivation for conducting the research discussed here. For the first time in Australian leadership research, the analytic focus is on the process (event, intervention, linkage, situation) where leadership is exercised, rather than being solely on the person. The field of vocational education and training is a diverse and complex one. It must remain flexible in the face of rapid shifts in the local-global nexus. This nexus is defined by the situation or context in which VET occurs. Therefore it is only by a proper attention to the situation, or intervention, that ‘leadership’ is meaningful and relevant. It is in the interests of research, policy and, of course, professional development practices in the VET field, to ensure that future leadership development is targeted to the conditions under which the leadership is likely to occur.

Different aspects of collective, or group skills and resources, commonly called social capital when used collectively, are drawn on at different stages of the leadership process. CRLRA has

found that the ingredients for success of partnerships *vary* according to the context, the resources available to the collaborative effort, the organisations involved and their goals. Emerging industries have different contexts from mature industries, and less established cultures and working relationships around VET. Their day-to-day work practices can be much more changeable and mercurial, lacking the benefit of a corporate history to draw on as a resource for guiding action, and understanding how these leadership interventions ‘work’ – their dynamics – can assist in the purposefulness of, and planning for desired outcomes.

In partnerships, the leadership process for any situation has trigger, initiation, development and management and sustainability stages regardless of the level of maturity of the partnership. As partnerships around education, including VET, mature, the partners come to share more equally in the leadership process, acting as one in more mature examples.

These findings together have considerable implications for the future quality of VET – responsiveness, flexibility, character and systemic structure. Effective leadership underpins the success of any strategic system, and that system includes the whole system from policy to grass roots. The interconnectedness of global socio-economies, thrown into stark reality by the terrorist attacks in the USA, creates a business climate where political stability (civic and social infrastructure) and economic goals overlap. New and emerging industries seek safe and conducive contexts in which to start their businesses, yet it cannot be claimed as yet that our VET system is able to respond to current needs (e.g., Ferrier, Trood & Whittingham, forthcoming). At no time in the evolution of VET in Australia, therefore, has there been a greater need for a reappraisal of leadership in VET.

The approach to VET partnerships is crucial to their long-term chances of success. A tactical approach involving a series of tactics or quick fixes, or a strategic approach focusing only on particular areas of weakness and strategies to address these areas, are not as likely to be as successful as ongoing capacity building arising from a vision for the future that is shared by the VET provider and its community (including industry). At the same time, it must be recognised that the building of partnerships occurs over time, and leadership processes must acknowledge and build on this. What we seek is a partnership that has a sense of agency; that is, an ability to act purposefully in pursuit of goals, to self-regulate, and to learn and change as and when they decide it is in the partners collective interests to do so.

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