VET leadership: context, characteristics and capabilities

Justin Brown, Australian Council for Educational Research

ABSTRACT

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in collaboration with the LH Martin Institute has conducted research to investigate the factors and challenges impacting on VET leaders, the influences and support mechanisms shaping their roles, and how they judge effective performance in their role. This paper, composed for the AVETRA 2011 conference, shines light on the personal and interpersonal capabilities required to perform particular roles effectively in an increasingly complex and diverse operating environment.

The target group for the study were VET workers who are directly and indirectly concerned with effective quality and change management in registered training organisations. A diverse range of providers participated in the research through interviews, surveys and workshops. The findings highlight the changing, at times conflicting, expectations on those working in the VET sector. Most importantly, the research shines light on practicable solutions and provides a framework for future discussion and research.

Supplementary online resources are being developed to provide a basis for reviewing the many 360 degree performance tools in use, but which are not typically underpinned by VET research. These resources will enable validation of existing leadership tools and practices being used for leadership performance management and development.

To assist those who find themselves leading large and complex training organisations, this study paints a picture of what VET leaders do, and of how they can do it best.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an extension of ACER research conducted in 2010 to examine leadership in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector. The research project *VET Leadership for the Future* was conducted in association with Dr John Mitchell, Peter Noonan Consulting and the LH Martin Institute. The objectives of the project were to learn more about leaders in the VET sector and their work – what leaders do, what influences and aspirations shape their role, and what capabilities and competencies underpin effective performance.

To further understand the world of the VET leader, this paper presents results from an analysis of open-ended responses collected as part of the project survey. The aim of this paper is to more fully contextualise and understand this working environment in the voice of the leader. In doing so, the paper aims to better understand the:

- Most *challenging* aspects in their current role;

- Most *significant* aspect of their current role;

- Best *analogy* to describe their current leadership role;

- Most *effective methods* for developing leadership capability; and

- Key steps to improve selection and development of leaders.

RESEARCH METHOD

The data collection method involved a stratified snowballing sampling technique whereby organisations were invited to take part through a direct approach from the project team. Attention was given to ensuring that a representative range of Australian institutions and leadership roles were involved. Each Registered Training Organisation (RTO) was approached through the Director or CEO equivalent to invite participation in the study and to forward the survey URL to leaders within their organisation.

The directions for disseminating the survey focused on individuals that were in scope of the 'VET leader' definition indentified in the project literature review: "people in roles classified as senior managers to who other managers report" (Mulcahy, 2003). While a broad definition, this helped target people who might be considered 'VET leaders'. A broad range of roles were recorded in the study including: director, chief financial officers, general managers, program managers/heads/directors, heads of school, or their equivalent.

The survey instrument used in the empirical phase of the study was delivered and completed online. It built upon a parallel instrument that had already been validated in schools (Scott, 2003) higher education (Scott, Coates and Anderson, 2008) and in a range of studies of professional capability amongst successful graduates (Vescio, 2005).

The quantitative items in the survey required respondents to rate specific items relating to the major area of focus in their role; indicators of effectiveness; influences on daily work; capabilities; and effectiveness of formal and informal activities in developing these capabilities. The survey received responses from 327 leaders from 24 RTOs. These results were tested and validated at a series of national workshops with more than 200 leaders attending.

The results presented in this paper draw on the extensive pool of open-ended responses collected as part of the project survey. The questions asked the following:

1. Briefly, what are the three most challenging aspects of your current role?

2. What aspect of your current role do you find *most* significant?

3. Overall, what analogy best describes what it is like to be in your current leadership role?

4. Overall, what do you believe to be the *most* effective methods for developing the capabilities of leaders in roles like yours?

5. What is one key step you believe *your organisation* could take to improve the selection and development of leaders?

Responses to these questions were sorted and thematically analysed initially by role. They were then analysed independently by different members of the project team, using the study's conceptual framework for academic leadership as a guide. The open-responses were then compared with the quantitative findings. Insights were then pooled and validated by team members. This analytical process included a focus not just on thematic analyses but identification of the degree of emotion evident in what leaders wrote, how often they returned to a topic or theme, and how frequently they wrote on particular issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most significant and challenging aspects in current role

This research was conducted at a time of turbulence in the VET sector. Leaders were facing complex policy and system changes as well as a changing strategic operating environment. The capability and capacity of the organisation to grow, expand, innovate and compete in this environment is considered a challenge for VET organisations and its leaders. The results reflect this environment and show that the work of VET leaders is becoming increasingly complex and is in a constant state of change. To that end, many leaders see *change* as a key challenge in their role - a challenge that can manifest itself in a number of forms.

The skills and capabilities expected of VET leaders are expanding and deepening. Within these new operating environments there is a challenge for leaders to improve their own business, commercial and corporate literacy. The traditional requirements of sectoral teaching and leadership experience have extended into a wide range of additional capabilities and competencies. These new expectations require expertise in a wide-range of corporate functions, such as Customer Relationship Management, Resource Management, Workforce Development, and Strategic Management. These increasingly important functions may require the VET leader to wear the hat of the strategic leader, operational manager, budget manager, change manager, contract and tender manager and policy analyst.

In addition to developing these skills, the VET leader is often responsible for developing and articulating, or contributing to, the organisational strategy. This requires interpersonal skills that can influence and bring change to resistant and well-established organisational cultures. This may involve the leader building the confidence of staff to move past the "*but we have always done it this way*" mindset. In these circumstances, leaders emphasise the importance of maintaining a strong organisational culture, particularly when spread across a number of divisions and geographic locations. This is a role which often requires them to identify and maintain the strategic focus of the organisation while "*changing mindsets*" through the "*engagement, empowerment and revitalisation of staff*". Leaders emphasise the importance of maintaining impetus for organisational and cultural transformation in what can be resistant and well-established organisational cultures.

Leaders are mindful of the compliance and legislative requirements of government for accreditation, auditing and reporting. The charter of operating as a business with, at times, competing educational expectations in a regulated environment can be a considerable challenge for these leaders. Initiatives to enact cultural change through organisational development have been common responses to these changing demands. However, implementing cultural change to centre more directly on growth, productivity and profitability has been a significant challenge for many leaders.

Leaders are highly cognisant of the emergent imperative of VET organisations to lower unit costs of delivery while continuing to meet organisational and individual targets. These challenges centre on pressures to generate new income and maintain quality amid falling public funds and increasing compliance costs. Leaders believe their ability to balance delivery under multiple funding arrangements and to make a profit from government funded training has become increasingly strained, particularly when operating in thin and regional markets.

Those in leadership roles emphasise the important function of human resource management in their role as it relates to the recruitment, retention and engagement of high quality staff to their organisation. Most leaders see value in providing professional development and opportunities to up-skill so as to continually enhance staff, leadership and organisational capability. The importance of building the capability of 'people' is particularly challenging as, for a broad range of operational and corporate functions, many leaders are frustrated by the operating systems and technology that are *"antiquated, unreliable and inefficient"*, and *"do not meet client needs"*.

Building strong and productive relationships with industry and professional groups remains a core dimension of the role. In maintaining the relevance, currency and robustness of this relationship, leaders emphasise the costs and resources associated with training package or curriculum moderation and development as a key issue. A further challenge in maintaining these relationships is in planning and forecasting of infrastructure and client needs with limited information and resources. There are ongoing challenges in placing institution-based students with sustainable and safe workplace learning opportunities. Leaders are also aware of the need to keep pace with technologies and innovative practice to support flexible teaching and learning, particularly in highly dynamic industries.

Central to the role of the VET leader, is the need to manage their own workloads effectively to allow sufficient time to consider strategic priorities of the organisation. There is a sense that some leaders *"never have enough time to think and get everything done that's expected"*. This balancing act can place considerable pressure on the leader to retain focus on strategic priorities whilst also dealing with urgent operational issues large numbers of their direct reports. At a personal level, these challenges are compounded by organisational politics, personal career plans and managing a work-life balance.

Analogies to describe current leadership role

When asked to provide an analogy of what it is like to be a leader in their organisation, leaders provided an array of evocative examples. The following analogies are grouped thematically into those that are: task-oriented; people-oriented; experience-oriented.

Task-oriented (jugglers, circus performers and entertainers)

More leaders likened their role to "*being a juggler*" than another other type of analogy. The capacity of leaders to keep multiple tasks and activities "*up in the air*" was a high-order characteristic of their roles. The juggling analogy was expounded to include "*…while standing on a shifting floor*"; "*…with many sharp swords*"; "*…with chainsaws*" "*...with one hand tied behind your back*"; and "*...while balancing on a monocycle*". Other leaders continued the circus theme to say they were "*walking on a tight rope with no balance beam*" and "*reaching for a trapeze*". Others liken their role to being the "*magician*" or the "*circus ring master...constantly ready when things don't go to plan*".

People-oriented (football coaches, stage managers, shepherds, conductors, captains)

Many leaders liken their role to being a "*coach of a football team*" or "*playing football as the captain-coach*" or the "*coach of a troubled AFL footy club with the confidence that there are great things ahead*". These are coaches being asked to "*kick even more goals*" with an "*increasing number of umpires to change the rules on you*". Some leaders likened their role to being the "*stage manager*" whose job it is to make sure that the "*the actors look good and the audience enjoys the show*". The day-to-day roles of leaders are likened to being a '*sheepdog*" or "*herding cats*" - an analogy which was elaborated on to include "*…in a thunderstorm!*" and "*...in a dustbowl where few want to explore past the edges, they just mill and hide*". Others liken it to being a "*conductor of an orchestra having to keep everyone in tune*" or a "*captain of a huge ocean liner avoiding icebergs*" or "*captain of a fleet of a dozen ships each with a different purpose!*"

Experience-oriented (roller-coaster rides, car racing, rafting and surfing)

The role of the VET leader is likened by many to the excitement and fear of "*riding a rollercoaster*" or "*a bullet train*". Some leaders experience "*lots of thrills and excitement coupled with fear of the unknown*" but always "*moving forward*". Some describe the experience as one similar to "*white river rafting*" or "*like surfing a wave*" and "*swimming towards shore with sharks snapping at your heels*". Others describe the experience as being like "*a fast lap that gets the adrenalin pumping*",

The remaining leaders liken their role to "*driving a Porsche with the handbrake on*" with "*very little of the map to where we are going*" or "*being given responsibility for a luxury car and not being allowed to drive it*". Leaders also liken their role to "*steering a ship that is slowly moving forward because the current is moving very fast*". There are also analogies that liken roles to swimming "*upstream*" or "*through mud*" or "*against the current*" or "*wearing concrete blocks*".

Overall, what do you believe to be the MOST effective methods for developing the capabilities of leaders in roles like yours?

Leaders emphasise the importance of providing current and aspiring leaders with a "*combination of methods*" that develop personal and interpersonal abilities as well as their contextual and technical skills and abilities. Mentoring, shadowing and on-the-job learning through effective leadership management and networking were commonly considered to be effective methods.

> *"Mentoring is so important. Too many inexperienced leaders get burnt and if they had support and assistance from a more experienced leader they would not be lost to the system."*

The leaders suggest contextualised formal training, a wide range of industry experience, including specialist, coupled with participation in professional development and professional networks. It is suggested that a sound knowledge of educational compliance and requirements for the specialist area usually developed "on the job" could be supplemented by conferences, leadership programs and targeted workshops. Formal qualifications in business, financial and human resource management are becoming increasingly important criteria for leadership positions in the sector.

The participation in leadership development programs which are custom-tailored to specific and general needs, coupled with regular, effective follow up and performance review. This may involve 360 degree feedback that is interpreted one on one between leader and mentor, with a realistic action plan. Developing an informal network of peers inside and outside the organisation can have benefits for the leader within their own organisation to reflect and learn from other organisations and leaders.

> *"I expect being coached/mentored by the 'right' person would be pretty wonderful. I enjoy the peer network I am part of and have developed a lot of knowledge, strategies and confidence from it."*

Leaders emphasise the importance of open communication and opportunities to reflect on workplace situations with a trusted and respected role model. This is ideally a person with a number of years experience in the sector, the organisation and, and ideally a similar role to the mentee. These opportunities for self-reflexivity are supplemented by discussions, work-placements or exchanges with leaders from a range of organisations to identify a range of leadership styles.

Finally, there is considerable emphasis placed not just on the 'what' but the 'when' of developing leaders. There is a view that aspiring leaders could undertake appropriate leadership courses in the early stages of leadership development, using reflective learning and ad-hoc peer conversations to build capability in middle stages and mentoring in the final stage.

Key steps to improve the selection and development of leaders

Leaders were able to provide a wide array of steps that their organisation could take to improve the selection and development of their leaders. The concept of formalised

leadership training, mentoring and succession programs was a consistent theme in the responses. These structured succession leadership development programs could include on the job, formal leadership programs and mentoring as core components.

These formalised programs could be underpinned by professional development of staff that encourages personalised informal learning that targets specific areas for improvement; thereby decreasing the reliance on "*generalist training*" in favour of real-world situations. These real-world experiences could be strengthened by temporary leadership placements where people have the opportunity to 'practice' and develop these skills.

There are also views that there could be greater consideration given to the personal and intellectual capabilities of aspiring and emerging leaders, rather than focusing solely on technical capabilities and experience – at both the recruitment and leader development stages. This could be addressed through the identification of multi-dimensional competencies through more formalised competency frameworks and assessments at different levels of the organisation. The view being that selection would then be based more on agreed and substantiated leadership capabilities; provide clarification to current roles consistency; and to the application process.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that leaders are under increasing and constant pressure to be more responsive to the mounting expectations of government, the fluctuating requirements of industry, and the diverse needs of communities and individuals. Commercial pressures have been with VET leaders for some time, but they now face new pressures arising from the recognition of VET as a key vehicle for national workforce development and productivity.

Leaders emphasise the importance of providing current and aspiring leaders with a combination of mixed methods to develop personal and interpersonal abilities as well as their contextual and technical skills and abilities. Mentoring, shadowing and on-the-job learning through effective leadership management and networking were commonly considered to be effective methods.

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