Exploring Leadership Actions and Practices Influencing Collective Learning: a Complex Relationship?

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In a highly competitive turbulent environment, continuous learning and innovation are essential for the survival and prosperity of an organisation. Members must collectively learn better ways to work together toward common objectives. The Behaviours and Actions of leaders can have a major influence on encouraging and facilitating collective learning and innovation. In this era of fluid teams, virtual organisation, and joint ventures, boundaries are often unclear and loyalties are divided. Yukl (2009) presents the essence of effective leadership and is dependent on ten leadership functions being proactively implemented. One of these leadership functions is the encouragement and facilitation of collective learning.

This paper reports the findings of an explorative questionnaire in which leaders provide an insight into perceptions of current leadership behaviours and actions that influence collective learning. From the literature, the authors identify leader behaviours and actions that influence collective learning around four key clusters. Analysis of the data, using
descriptive statistics, reports key findings with respective to collective learning. The degree of importance attributed to these behaviours and actions is contrasted with the level of occurrence in the sample organisations. This paper reports differences in level of occurrence and importance of leadership actions and behaviours within the clusters of ‘stimulating’, ‘enabling’, ‘cooperating and supporting’, and ‘incentivising and rewarding’, which are important in enhancing collective learning.

Keywords: leadership actions, collective learning, individual learning

Research Background

Today organisations face a turbulent environment, which is influencing the need to continually adapt, innovate, and reinvent themselves (Amy 2008; Bell 1973; Drew and Smith 1995). Altman and Iles (1998) argue that the rate at which individuals and organisations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage. In a similar vein, Amy (2008) and de Geus (1988) state that organisational learning is a primary source of competitive advantage. This is argued further by Hayes and Allinson (1998) contend that the quality of individual and collective learning is a key determinant of organisational success (Lank and Lank 1995; Appelbaum and Gallagher 2000; De Geus 1988; Garratt 1999; Lei et al. 1999; Pedler et al. 1989; Slater and Narver 1995; Stata 1989; Thomas and Allen 2006).

Collective learning is a broad term that embraces a wide range of ideas including the learning organisation, team learning, collaborative learning; communities of practice, strategic learning, and organisation led learning (Garavan and McCarthy 2008). However, there is also some concern expressed in the literature regarding the clarity surrounding collective learning. Wang and Ahmed (2003) state that the definition of collective learning is excessively broad and other academics indicate that it suffers from insufficient agreement around its key concepts and problems (Cohen and Sproul 1991; Daft and Huber 1987; Huber 1991; Dodgson 1993; Garvin 1993; Hawkins 1994; Miller 1996; and Popper and Lipshtiz 2000). Despite these concerns, the authors of this paper view learning as essential for improving adaptation to external change, and as a source of incremental improvements in efficiency and human capital (Crossan Lane and White 1999).

The role of leaders in both individual and collective learning is well documented. At an individual level, leaders need to be flexible enough to learn from mistakes, change their assumptions and beliefs, and refine their mental models. One of the most important competencies for effective leadership in changing situations is the ability to learn from experience and adapt to change (Argyris 1991; Dechant 1990; Marshall-Mies et al. 2000; Mumford and Connelly 1991; Zaccaro Mumford Marks et al. 1997). Individual learning may not always be sufficient to guarantee organisational success and that collective learning is required (Hayes and Allinson 1998). At an organisational level, an important aspect of leadership involves influencing improvements in collective learning about effective processes and strategies (Argyris and Schon 1978).
Collective learning- a multi level perspective

A multilevel perspective that examines characteristics, factors and processes at the individual, team, and organisational level, can provide an in depth understanding of HRD concepts (Garavan McGuire and O'Donnell 2004; Klein Tosi and Cannella 1999).

In exploring organisational learning, Wang and Ahmed (2003) state that as a concept it is rooted into many perspectives of management (Garratt 1999) and its practices are influenced by a wide range of factors, such as organisation strategy, culture, structure, absorptive capacity, problem-solving ability and employee participation all determining the learning results.

Collective learning processes involve a broad range of stakeholders that include dyads, teams, communities, networks, organisations and whole societies (Sadler-Smith 2006). It is suggested by Arrow McGrath and Berdahl (2000) that individuals, groups, and organisations can be conceptualised as a nested hierarchy of learning systems. From a system’s perspective learning can occur at individual, group and organisational levels, and learning at each level influences learning at the other levels (Crossan Lane and White 1999). One of the major common denominators in the concept is the notion of hierarchical levels of learning (Altman and Iles 1998).

In exploring collective learning processes, these can be seen to be dynamic and cumulative in nature. They involve social interaction, the leverage of relational synergies, and the development of shared understanding and meaning about the learning process and how learning is derived. In addition, Garavan and McCarthy (2008) contend that collective learning processes include a range of characteristics that relate to new ways of interacting, skills, knowledge and changing patterns of interaction and behavioural routines

Learning can be conceptualised as an iterative process involving action, reflection, change and the creation of new knowledge and insight (Gond and Herrbach 2006). Organisational-level explanations of learning focus on routines and the role of culture, whereas individual level explanations focus on the cognitions and behaviours of individuals. Garavan and McCarthy (2008) propose that where individuals have gaps in their learning, this hinders the effectiveness of learning at the organisational level, highlighting the multi-level nature of learning. This argument is supported by Senge’s (1990) proposition that organisations can learn only when individual members of the organisation are learning. Individual learning occurs where the organisation has strong cultural values for personal development, lifelong education, and it provides skill development through training and development programs.

The actions and behaviours of leaders can be viewed as being central to collective learning. Indeed, leadership can be seen as the necessary mediating function between the organisation and its members, imprinting on learning at all levels (Schein 1988; Smith and Peterson 1988; Schneider 1987; Schneider et al. 1995).
Leaders’ role in encouraging and facilitating learning

As indicated above, leaders play a key role in cultivating collective learning. In bridging organisational and individual learning Altman and Iles (1998) argue that there is a crucial interlinked role of leadership and teams. Teams are social units engaged in collective learning and provide opportunities for the cross fertilisation of ideas and setting learning norms (Masrick 1994; Senge 1990). Communication, openness, the support of learning, developing a shared vision, rewarding initiatives, responding to challenge, and recognising team-work are all aspects of an organisation’s learning (Argyris 1987; Pedler et al. 1991; and Senge 1990).

At the dyadic level there are several ways a leader can encourage and facilitate individual and joint learning. Encouraging innovative thinking, allowing enough autonomy and time to pursue creative ideas, setting innovative goals, and being receptive to subordinate’s improvement suggestions all contribute to learning (Yukl 2009). Amy (2008) explores this in more detail stating that leaders encourage individual learning through engaging followers cognitively and emotionally. By leaders dispensing advice, consulting relevant stakeholders, empowering critical thinking and autonomy, stimulating experimentation through brainstorming and calculated risk taking, leaders display emotional intelligence in communicating and relating to follower needs. Leaders have a role to play in keeping subordinates informed about relevant learning opportunities and making it easier for them to pursue these opportunities. As providing learning opportunities in isolation is not enough to guarantee actual learning, leaders should provide tangible rewards to encourage individuals to acquire new knowledge and apply it to improve their job performance. Amy (2008) also contends that non responsiveness of leaders (i.e. lack of communication) acts as a primary hindrance to learning.

At group level there are also many ways leaders can influence collective learning (Day Gronn and Salas 2004; Mumford Scott Baddis and Strange 2002). This includes:

- leaders encouraging the group to use systematic procedures for analysing problems;
- implementation of helpful procedures for generating creative solutions (e.g. brainstorming);
- facilitating discussion of a broad range of options;
- preventing short sighted decision making without considering the potential costs and benefits (e.g. by developing best and worse case scenarios);
- encouraging group members to build on each other’s ideas rather than be too critical;
- to experiment with competing solutions and their consequences: and
- use after activity reviews to identify effective and ineffective practices for a repetitive activity.

Many authors consider that leaders at all levels can help to create conditions favourable to learning and innovation (Berson et al. 2006; Cavalieri and Fearon 1996; Chaston et al. 2001; James 2002; Nadler et al. 1995; Shein 1993; Senge 1990; Vera and Crossan 2004; Yeung et al. 1999). Leaders can encourage learning and innovation through supporting and funding internal efforts to develop ideas, providing recognition and rewards for creative ideas, encouraging diffusion of ideas and new knowledge throughout the organisation, and promoting flexibility and innovation as...
key values in the corporate culture (Yukl and Lepsinger 2004). In practice this can involve encouraging subordinates and peers to view all practices as temporary, to question traditional assumptions and supporting relevant learning practices.

As presented above collective learning can be viewed as multi dimensional in nature, involving a range of stakeholders. It requires consideration of organisational, team and individual concerns that are integrated to stimulate, support, enable and reward learning. The role of the leader in seen as central to learning, as his/her behaviours and action can either enhance or limit collective learning. The literature review has exposed these as encompassing both strategic and operational level influences, which can affect organisational, team and individual level learning. The role of leaders in collective learning can be seen to be complex and complicated in terms of the range, scope and nature of influencing actions. In order to provide some coherence and structure to these actions the authors have categorised these into four key clusters of ‘stimulating’, ‘enabling’, ‘cooperating and supporting’, and ‘incentivising and rewarding’. These clusters form the basis for the exploration of leaders’ behaviours and actions in this study.

Research Methods

The overall research philosophy favoured in this paper is that of critical realism. This philosophy propounds both the social conditions and the human construct consequences of reality (Saunders 2006; Bhaskar 1978). An explorative on-line questionnaire was undertaken as a trial for the main study with sample of all IiP companies in Scotland. The questions were derived from the literature review to explore the role of leadership in enhancing collective learning activities in organisations.

The questionnaire used Likert scales to provide an ordered, one-dimensional scale, enabling respondents to choose one option that best aligned with their view. The options provided were carefully selected statements that act together to give a useful and coherent picture of leaders role in enhancing collective learning.

The prevalence of collective learning activities was examined using a 5 point Likert scale of statements (ranging from always, often, occasionally, rarely, and never) relating to frequency of actions and behaviours. A scale of 3 points was used to gain respondents perceptions as to the level of importance of the collective learning activities, ranging from very important, important, and not important.

Analysis of the data was undertaken using descriptive statistics to examine and quantify the behaviours and actions of leaders and their perceived importance across the four key clusters identified above. These are categorised as Stimulating Actions, Enabling Actions, Cooperating and Supporting Actions and Incentivising and Rewarding Actions.

The findings are based on responses by leaders from 27 organisations from the original sample of 40 IiP accredited organisations in Scotland. Approximately 53% of the organisations were public sector in nature and 47% were organisations were from the private sector. Within the organisations a range of perspectives were elicited
Preliminary Findings

The pilot findings show that there is some significant clustering of leadership actions regarding individual and collective learning processes. These clusters can be represented by considering the strategic and operational influencing behaviours of leaders across Scottish organisations. The four key cluster areas may be categorised as stimulating actions; enabling actions; cooperating and supporting actions; and, incentivising and rewarding actions.

Stimulating Actions

This cluster contains leadership actions which are focused on engaging with followers in order to facilitate learning (Table 1). It is noteworthy that whilst these actions are practiced often by around 50% of respondents, there is a high level of importance attached to each of them.

Table 1. Stimulating Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership action</th>
<th>Perceived importance of leadership action</th>
<th>Practice of leadership action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning from mistakes</td>
<td>Very important: 71%</td>
<td>Important: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain why development is important and beneficial</td>
<td>Very important: 71%</td>
<td>Important: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek ways to generate new ideas</td>
<td>Very important: 71%</td>
<td>Important: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide challenging and honest feedback</td>
<td>Very important: 71%</td>
<td>Important: 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulate an inspiring vision</td>
<td>Very important: 70%</td>
<td>Important: 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek ways for individuals to develop skills and capabilities</td>
<td>Very important: 67%</td>
<td>Important: 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage the use of after-activity reviews to identify effective and ineffective practices</td>
<td>Very important: 67%</td>
<td>Important: 19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure that the culture supports sharing of knowledge and learning</td>
<td>Very important: 62%</td>
<td>Important: 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage individuals to build on each other’s ideas</td>
<td>Very important: 52%</td>
<td>Important: 33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This then suggests that leaders could engage more proactively with their followers through increased communication (i.e. explaining why development is important and beneficial and articulating the vision), focused feedback, and innovation in idea generation without boundaries in order to stimulate individual learning supporting the work of Argyris (1987) and Pedler et al. (1991).

It is of interest that the action of ensuring that the culture supports sharing of knowledge and learning is one of the least practised and perceived as being one of the least important in this cluster. This action is characterised by its focus on the development of an open culture which encourages mutuality and shared learning which is understood to be beneficial to groups and individuals (Wang and Ahmed 2003). It could be argued that without the strengths of such a culture there may be a barrier to successfully performing other leadership actions that give a grounding for collective and individual learning. In addition, this lack of sharing of knowledge and learning can also be seen in the relatively low rating of both the presence of, and importance given to, individuals to build on each other’s ideas.
**Enabling Actions**

The leadership actions contained in the cluster ‘enabling actions’ are practiced *often* by less than 35% of respondents (Table 2). These actions may be associated primarily with facilitation of individual learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership action</th>
<th>Perceived importance of leadership action</th>
<th>Practice of leadership action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise important contributions and achievements</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain individual, group and organisational benefits</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge responsibility for mistakes</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage sharing of learning opportunities</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide coaching for individuals</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help employees develop self-awareness and to achieve their full potential</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devote resources to development and learning</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell people about group activities and achievements</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a high level of importance associated with these actions which suggests that leaders appreciate the value of opportunities for individual learning, but need to be mindful of organisational rhetoric and the reality of an individual’s learning experience (Garavan and McCarthy 2008; Senge 1990). Leaders should consider how they might close the gap between perception and practice perhaps through developing, enhancing and maintaining dyadic relationships where constructive explanations, recognition of successes, responsibility, accountability and ownership are integral elements in the learning experience as described by Yukl (20090 and Amy (2008).

**Cooperating and Supporting Actions**

The cluster of cooperating and supporting actions contains leadership actions which are viewed through an organisational lens where employees are seen holistically as a group (Table 3). Table 3 shows that in comparison to stimulating and enabling actions, the cooperative and supportive actions are practiced more often but are perceived as less important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning action/behaviour</th>
<th>Perceived importance of leadership action</th>
<th>Practice of leadership action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain cooperative relationships and teamwork</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support development activities</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display supportive, considerate behaviours</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote learning events</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage and support initiative and problem solving</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasise the importance of cooperation and teamwork</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasise values that indicate concern and respect for individual diversity</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, it could be suggested that these actions have become habitual in everyday leadership practice, and as a result they are perhaps not considered to be as pressing as other actions which we discuss in this paper. For instance, promoting teamwork and supportive behaviours could be seen as accepted and expected organisational
requirement within this study sample. Alternatively, although these practices occur regularly, they are not perceived as being central to collective learning.

**Incentivising and Rewarding Actions**

The leadership actions contained in this cluster can be seen to be the ‘outliers’ in leadership practice (Table 4). Each of these actions is carried out by leaders occasionally rather than often as has been the case in the previous clusters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership action</th>
<th>Perceived importance of leadership action</th>
<th>Practice of leadership action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate learning opportunities</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure and reward learning</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage individuals to be critical of each others’ ideas</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage experimentation with competing solutions to assess their consequences</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase incentives for mutual cooperation</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the actions are also considered to be less important. This could be the result of leadership perceptions concerning the value of incentives and rewards in promoting learning which may be seen as an expected, integral element in work performance. It is also noticeable that the encouragement of experimentation is relatively low ((Day Gronn and Salas 2004; Mumford Scott Baddis and Strange 2002). This is at odds with previous actions such as 'learning from mistakes’ (see Table 1) and suggests that in operational reality perhaps leaders may be more risk averse than implied by previous cluster results. In addition, whilst leaders are keen to find ways to generate new ideas (see Table 1) they are not as keen to encourage individuals to be critical of each others’ ideas (Yukl 2009). This may suggest that leaders could be conflict averse and consensus seeking, a possible barrier to innovation and creativity.

**Conclusion**

This study reveals that there is an understanding of the importance of the role of leaders in enhancing collective learning. However, there is evidence to suggest that leaders are not fully engaged with the range of collective learning activities identified in the literature. In looking across the clusters, it appears that leaders are more engaged with dyadic relationship building and support. However, when considering aspects of recognition, incentivising and reward it seems that leaders are less concerned in practice, although they still acknowledge the importance of these.

The results support the notion that the role of leaders in collective learning is multifaceted and complex. It is recognised that the findings from this pilot study are not representative and therefore limited generalisations can be inferred. However, as the keystone of a larger study, this paper provides a valuable insight into dimensions and dynamics of collective learning leadership in practice.
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