“Walking the Talk”:
The nature and role of ‘Leadership Culture’ within organisation culture/s

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ABSTRACT

"We must become the change we want to see."

---Mahatma Gandhi

The paper develops and explores the construct ‘leadership culture’ with reference to organisation culture/s. A research model is proposed to explore this connection. A study of leadership culture components, showing an impact of the alignment between leaders’ personal values and leadership team behaviour on leadership team culture, is used to make the case for additional research looking at how culture role modelling by leaders may affect the creation and development of organisation culture/s. The key finding is that leader behaviour is contingent upon the existing organisational culture, rather than being the creator of an organisational culture. The findings and future research implications have important ramifications for how leaders develop and use leadership culture, with a particular focus on their potential role as organisation culture generators, carriers and shapers.

Key words: leadership culture, leaders’ personal values, leadership behaviour, leadership teams, culture role modelling, organisational culture

INTRODUCTION

“Walking the Talk” is a common phrase in the language of leadership (e.g. Taylor, 2005; Miller, 2002), but what does it entail and what effect might it have on organisation culture/s? Taylor (2005: p.351) implores leaders, “to make the links specific between what you do and the values and beliefs that underpin this”. In this way, a leader’s behaviour and values are assumed to assist the development of organisational culture (Schein, 1992); but how might leaders, acting together to create leadership culture, utilise this in their role as organisation culture shapers? This paper explores the notion and contribution of ‘leadership culture’, considered as a fusion of the collective conscious (leadership behaviour) and unconscious (leaders’ personal values) expression of leadership (Aitken, 2002). A previous study (Aitken, 2004) is summarised, providing evidence for the components of such a leadership culture. Indeed, the central proposition is that leaders, in their demonstration of a
peculiar brand of personal values based leadership behaviour, are more likely to be able to produce a distinctive organisational culture/s. Implicit within this proposition is the notion that the leader values and values-based behaviour must complement the organisational culture, rather than create a new organisational culture.

**WHAT IS ‘LEADERSHIP CULTURE’ IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANISATION CULTURE/S?**

Previous excursions into defining ‘leadership culture’ are rare (Alban-Metcalfe & Alimo-Metcalfe, 2003 – extrapolated from studies of individual leadership), as are empirical papers investigating the nature and specific business effects of the relationships between leadership-culture constructs (Parry & Proctor-Thompson, 2003; Block, 2003). The extant literature generally indicates that personal leadership mainly impacts organisational culture and perhaps vice versa (as exemplified by Schein, 1992), although we are left unsure about the exact part leaders play, particularly through conversion of their personal values (Schwartz, 1994) into everyday collective leadership behaviour. As Crossan (2003) records from an interview with Chris Argyris, academics tend to concentrate on the internal and external validity of constructs, with theory running ahead of real world application. Consequently, ‘implemental’ validity and usability is potentially overlooked. Therefore, this paper sets out to investigate the make-up and potential research/business value of the concept ‘leadership culture’, leaning heavily on the transformational–transactional leadership ‘by the team’ school (Bass & Avolio, 1990), as opposed to leadership proffered by a designated sole leader. The term ‘by the team’ is used here to signify the collection and combined efforts of formal and informal leaders operating throughout an organisation. As Block (2003) demonstrated, immediate supervisors can have a greater influence on employee perceptions of culture than all other leadership levels. To begin, the author offers a research model (Figure 1 below) placing leaders’ culture role modelling as the natural, albeit inadequately explored, ‘implemental’ link between ‘leadership culture’ and organisation culture/s.

The model starts by positioning leadership ‘by the team’ as a collective leadership phenomenon, made up of formal and informal leaders acting in concert. Bate (1994: p.242) expressed the need to “depersonalise and decentre the leadership concept, so that we begin to perceive leadership as a co-operative or collective enterprise”. Here, leaders are classified as a combination of officially designated leaders, both ‘near’ and ‘far’ (Shamir, 1995) and ‘emergent’ leaders, encompassing those who have been granted this label by followers. Although the author agrees with the sentiments of Burns (1996) and Bass (1998) that all team members contribute towards transformational leadership (that includes the development of culture change capability), observation of practising leadership teams suggests this is often aspirational, with much effort required to forge such a leadership alliance.
In this paper, ‘leadership culture’ is defined as, “that amalgam of primary purpose, critical behaviours and essential personal values, identified and agreed by the leaders as authentic and functional for their organisation culture (whole or part), which the leaders (formal and emergent) role model through their everyday communications and actions”. As Harris (2005: p.80) notes about distributed leadership, “Effective leaders must have the ability to read and adjust to the particular context they face. In this respect, their leadership behaviour is contingent on context and situation. The choices that they make relate directly to their own beliefs, values and leadership style.” In this mode leaders become a ‘psychological group’, consisting of people who interact with one another, are psychologically aware of one another and who perceive themselves to be a group (Schein, 1992). The group psychosocial traits present refer to shared understandings, unconscious group processes, group cognitive style and group emotional tone (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Central to the idea of leadership culture is that this coming together of consistent and authentic leadership behaviour - with authenticity a product of personal values aligned with their behaviour counterparts (a notion illustrated later with some results from an empirical study of leadership team culture - Aitken, 2004), is the bedrock on which leadership culture and the form of culture role modelling subsequently employed by leaders, can be founded. An ill defined leadership culture means a fuzzy and shaky platform for leaders’ culture role modelling, resulting in inconspicuous and/or unclear cues for what is important (purpose and task focus) and how we should act around here, i.e. organisation culture/s. As Kluckhohn (1951: p.86) wrote, “Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinct achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values”. In this way, creation and management of meaning through leadership culture becomes a continuous process whereby leaders, through words and deeds, communicate ‘integrating ethos’ (Selznick, 1957) in order to focus energy
towards collective identity and joint purpose. The argument outlined here is that without sufficient time and energy devoted to understanding what this guiding ethos looks and feels like, and then consciously attempting to role model it, leaders are unlikely to create sufficient critical mass to wield any salient directional social influence on organisation culture/s. The author suggests therefore that leaders need to talk in depth about the exact nature of their walk, before they attempt to enact it. As Mumford states in Pearn (2002: p.210-211), unless theories in use are surfaced and discrepancies acknowledged, learning at different levels of depth will not occur. In this sense, leadership culture learning should enable leaders to close the gap between ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theory in use’ (Argyris & Schon, 1974). But, first of all, what might the components of a leadership culture be?

A STUDY OF ‘LEADERSHIP CULTURE’

To answer the above question a recent study (Aitken, 2004) attempted to discover whether the match between leaders’ specific personal values and the leadership behaviour they actually observed in their teams (23 leadership teams from organisations across New Zealand and the UK, containing a total of 191 team members - 80% operating in the public sector), i.e. the type and strength of the leadership culture present, bore any relation to their evaluation of the leadership functioning within those teams; as measured by their satisfaction with the leadership ‘by the team’ abilities and perceived team effectiveness, i.e. two leadership team culture outcomes. In part, this was a ready response to Lord & Brown (2004: p.7) who stated that, “We maintain that articulating the connections between leaders and subordinates’ self-concepts will provide leadership researchers with a platform to move beyond the study of leader behaviour to the study of leadership”; and directly addressed their resulting Hypothesis 5.5 (p.212): “Leader behaviour has its greatest effect when it activates coherent patterns of values”

Methodology

An extensive literature review (Aitken, 2003) had concluded with evidence of a theoretical association between specific types of personal values and leadership behaviour constructs. In broad terms, this was reflected in a possible conceptual relationship between ‘transformational’ type personal values and transformational leadership behaviour (i.e. people and future focussed values and behaviour) and also between ‘status quo’ type personal values and transactional leadership behaviour (i.e. present and task focussed values and behaviour). As Baker & Jenkins (1993: p.2) note, “The value concept is often used to identify unknown or underlying variables in individual actions. It is this ostensible uncovering of the cognitive path between personal values and behaviour which gives values research its significance to management researchers”. Moreover, Hambrick & Brandon (1988), in the context of a general model of executive values and action, suggest that values first of all influence the perception of stimuli and thereby shape information gathering, and secondly values guide behaviour in order to uphold established terminal values. This is the essence of investigating the influence of
‘alignment’ on the perception of leadership team culture, i.e. the unconscious alignment of personal values with the conscious perception of behaviour that either reflects or does not match these values.

In order to provide definition for the personal values and leadership behaviour constructs being matched, a factor analysis of the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) (Schwartz, 1994) and the Team Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (TMLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 2001) revealed the factor structures listed in Figure 2. Tjosvold et al. (2003) had already revealed support for values impacting on team effectiveness through team relationships. The approach taken here is consistent with the emerging understanding that values have their impact through team member interaction (Morris et al., 1998). Taking the ideas from ‘Path-Goal’ and ‘Expectancy’ theory (reported in Yukl, 1989) and using the research model in Figure 2 below, whose production was guided by the Hackman & Morris (1979) modelling framework, the theoretical proposition tested was that as the alignment between team members’ personal values and their perception of leadership ‘by the team’ behaviour strengthens, they will expect the latter to continue to remain in line with the former, thereby maintaining their motivation for the team interaction, and resulting in a positive assessment of leadership team culture; as represented by measures of perceptions of team effectiveness and satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities.

![Figure 2](image-url)
To operationalise this proposition and evaluate the effects of ‘alignment’, a ‘gap’ variable was produced which could subsequently be correlated with each of the two team culture outcome variables. Essentially, it was postulated that alignment between a team member’s personal values strength (for either transformational or status quo types of values) and their perception of the strength of the presence of team leadership behaviour (which respectively mirrors either transformational or status quo types of values), will lead to a perception of high team effectiveness and high satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities. As the gap between a team member’s personal values strength (for either transformational or status quo types of values) and their perception of the presence of team leadership behaviour (which respectively mirrors either transformational or status quo types of values) grows, such that there is more of the behaviour than is required by the strength of the values, then the subsequent perception of each of the two team outcome measures will be heightened. However, if there is less team behaviour present than is required by the personal values strength, then the same measures will be suppressed. The correlation effect will be reversed if team member’s transformational type personal values are strong and the status quo type leadership behaviour present is perceived as not strong. In this case, as the gap becomes larger, i.e. the presence of status quo leadership type behaviour is perceived to be less (a situation considered to be positive by those holding transformational type values), this will be associated with perceptions of high team effectiveness and satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities. This approach is consistent with the methodology employed in the work on Leader Member Exchange Quality by Ashkanasy & O’Connor, (1997). Congruence (alignment) scores were calculated by taking the absolute difference between personal values and perceptions of leadership ‘by the team’ behaviour scores on each of the personal values and leadership team behaviour construct associate pairings.

**Results, Limitations and Discussion** (restrictions on space mean that only data analysis and results relevant to this paper are included here – full results can be found in Aitken, 2004)

Regression analysis of the relative variance contributions of the highest correlated alignments to the two team culture outcome measures (overall team effectiveness and overall satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities) revealed the following:

**Table 1 - Regression Analysis for Overall Team Effectiveness (SPSS stepwise method)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Adjusted R squared</th>
<th>Standardised Coefficients - Beta</th>
<th>F (change in R squared)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful minus</td>
<td>.260 **</td>
<td>-.384</td>
<td>67.782**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Working</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatism minus</td>
<td>.319** (combined with above)</td>
<td>-.281</td>
<td>45.508**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Vision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Correlational results (Aitken, 2004) indicated that ‘Resourceful’ provided the highest and second highest single impact through its association with ‘Team Working’ and ‘Team Innovation’, respectively. Inspection of the items making up the factor Resourceful indicate the possibility of motivational values elements that may underpin striving for team working and team effectiveness (e.g. capable, wisdom, intelligent, successful); and team working and team innovation (e.g. freedom, creativity, broad-minded), in a general sense. Notably, the relationship with Overall Satisfaction with Leadership ‘by the team’ Abilities reverses and slightly reduces the relative impact of the Resourceful-Team Working and Resourceful-Team Innovation alignment associates, with the latter now in front of the former. Perhaps, in this research subject population, the perception of satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities depends more on the climate for innovation (West, 1990) than team working per se. Further evidence of support for the differential effect of Resourceful-Team Working and Resourceful-Team Innovation alignment on the relationship with the team outcome measures is found in the results from the regression analysis. The Resourceful-Team Working alignment associate accounted for 26% of the variance in the assessment of team effectiveness, whilst the Resourceful-Team Innovation alignment associate accounted for 22% of the variance in the assessment of satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities.

Evidence was also found from the regression analysis for a differential effect of Conservatism (when considered as a transformational type personal value) with transformational type leadership ‘by the team’ behaviours (Team Vision and Team Working) alignments on the relationship with the team outcome measures. The Conservatism-Team Vision alignment associate accounted for an increase of 6% of the total variance in the assessment of team effectiveness (i.e. the second and final significant model predictor), whilst the Conservatism-Team Working alignment associate accounted for an increase of 4% of the variance in the assessment of satisfaction with leadership ‘by the team’ abilities (once again, the second and final significant model predictor). What we might be witnessing here is the presence of an implicit public service culture (vision and way of working) impacting on perceptions of the specified team culture outcomes. Indeed, Payne (1991) asserts that a feature of a strong culture is the consonance between the explicit and implicit cultures, with implicit culture

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Table 2 - Regression Analysis for Overall Satisfaction with Leadership ‘by the team’ Abilities (SPSS stepwise method)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Adjusted R squared</th>
<th>Standardised Coefficients - Beta</th>
<th>F (change in R squared)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful minus</td>
<td>.218 **</td>
<td>-.348</td>
<td>54.043**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Innovation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatism minus</td>
<td>.263** (combined</td>
<td>-.253</td>
<td>34.927**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Working</td>
<td>with above)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Significant at p < 0.01.
representing the set of cultural beliefs, values and norms that underlie the observed behaviour (the explicit culture).

The study above demonstrates that alignment between two critical facets of leadership culture, namely leaders’ personal values and leadership team behaviour, does indeed influence team members’ perception of the functionality of their team culture. The closer the gap between personal values and actual leadership behaviour, the more positive participants regard their team culture. The role for leaders then is to make explicit the implicit culture through role modelling, so that leadership team members can begin to understand the pattern and strength of one another’s transformational values and how these might be either facilitating or blocking values congruent behavioural responses to leadership team culture change. As West & Altink (1996) point out, these factors do not occur simply because teams are put together. The degree of task and social reflexivity required to develop, maintain and enhance these norms of behaviour will only bear fruit if (leadership) teams are trained and developed in how to recognise and utilise these values and behaviours. Replication of this study with different business population samples and the use of a cross-level research methodology (Schnake & Dumler, 2003) and WABA data analysis (Dansereau, Alutto & Yammarino, 1984) - comparing within-group correlations with between-group correlations, and thereby off-setting any demographic effects and levels of analysis issues - would confirm the generalisability of the measures, the model and the findings. Of particular theoretical interest might be the differential impact of the alignment associates, Resourceful-Team Working on Team Effectiveness and Resourceful-Team Innovation on Satisfaction with Leadership ‘by the team’ abilities, and the implications this has for West’s (1990) Team Climate model.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to address the challenge laid down by Collinson & Grint (2005: p.6), “to develop more nuanced and complex models that, for example, recognise the ‘embeddedness’ of leadership practice in the economic, technological and social relations of organisation and society”. For the leadership social influence process to bear fruit as intended leaders must know the exact look of their walk and its precise link to the values origin of their talk, before they begin attempts to influence their followers. Additionally they need to know which behaviour change influence mechanisms are likely to have the most impact on organisation culture/s. This is consistent with leaders current views. For example, a content analysis of the views of 10 senior women across the Queensland, Australia public service (Limerick & Field, 2003) revealed the importance of role modelling where ethical behaviour is concerned. Leaders are advised to select and practice the role modelling and other activities that demonstrate and convert commitment to a particular cultural paradigm, and continually monitor the gap between their espoused and actual values and behaviour (current state of leadership culture) by receiving feedback on their progress from those they are
attempting to influence (those within the executive/emergent leaders collective and the recipients of their leadership actions). As Thomas (1999) notes, creating an effective leadership team requires amongst other things managing complex operations, issues and strategies seamlessly, i.e. speaking with one voice; and modelling the behaviours they want people to emulate. Thus, this paper positions leaders culture role modelling as a start point for investigating how to convert leadership culture into organisation culture. Bearing in mind that some 50-70% of change management initiatives fail to make any lasting impact on the organisations they purport to reform (LaClair & Rao, 2002) this is not a trivial matter. Researchers could add value by using methodologies that can capture and assess the relative power of leader induced organisation culture/s influence mechanisms, used either singly or in combination, for organisation culture creation and development. This is likely to require studies that include experimental, case study and real life observation of leadership in business. Indeed, a W. K. Kellogg Foundation funded review by Russon & Reinelt (2004) of 55 leadership development programmes found that few programmes have an explicit programme theory (or theory of change) explaining how and why a set of activities are expected to lead to outcomes and impacts, whilst the evaluation type and scope was often constrained by the funding organisations requirement for immediate feedback. This paper offers leadership and organisation development research and practice professionals a rationale, model, constructs, and ways forward for the study of leadership culture and its likely impact on organisation culture/s.

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