A new paradigm? Indigenous leaders exercising influence and working across boundaries

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Abstract

Many Indigenous Australians who are also leaders live in two worlds. They work in ‘white’ organisations, but retain their indigenous identity, sense of community and cultural background. They are truly managing ‘on the edge’. In exercising influence in these situations, they operate quite differently from white leadership models. Indigenous leaders must legitimate themselves by showing where they come from, and who their families are. They draw personal strength from family and from country. Australian indigenous leaders work with and through networks and communities, using collective identity as a resource. Knowledge, confidence and peer group support are critical to overcoming a legacy of self-doubt and hardship.

Key words

Organisational and personal learning; flexibility; authentic leadership; public sector and community leadership; spirituality and leadership

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Introduction

Recent work on leadership points to its cultural contextualisation. Leadership norms and practices reflect the values of the societies which give rise to them (Blunt and Jones, 1997; Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque & House, 2006). In these situations, the dominant leadership paradigm forms part of the colonising civilisation, operating over and above the traditional leadership practices of the indigenous inhabitants (Smith 1999).

We draw upon our work with the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC) to suggest that Indigenous leaders in Australia are evolving new ways of negotiating this relationship at the organisational level. In doing so, they are managing ‘on the edge’: drawing upon their indigeneity in ways that enable them to work across boundaries while also exercising influence within their networks and communities.

The context within which this paradigm is developing is of particular interest, because most Indigenous Australians do not live in remote areas of the country but in cities and regional towns, where they have, in many ways, integrated with the non-indigenous population. At the same time, problems of disadvantage, poverty and misunderstanding remain.

The job of leaders emerging in these conditions is complex, in that they must find ways to create leadership ‘Two Ways’ – gaining acceptance in their communities on the one hand, while learning to operate effectively in non-indigenous systems of governance. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with a cohort of Indigenous leaders-in-training, we explore the ways in which leadership is being constructed by this remarkable group.

Indigeneity and leadership

We began our inquiry by asking: how do indigenous leaders, working at the interface between Indigenous communities and government, exercise influence? This is difficult terrain conceptually,
because indigeneity is itself a contested concept (see Merlan, 2005) and leadership is the subject of a vast literature, which has generated competing if not conflicting models.

The research on indigenous leadership, although diverse, does identify a number of themes that are likely to be important and need to be addressed in the current research. Community rather than organisation is likely to provide the important social cultural context for individual and group identity amongst indigenous people (Edwards, 2011). Jules’s six factors of (Canadian) Aboriginal leadership stress the values-basis of this form of leadership: not being separate from the group, having wisdom, showing humility, being a servant rather than a boss, having integrity and playing a facilitative role (Jules 1999). Another important attribute is spirituality. In Australia, Aboriginal spirituality reflects an understanding of the interconnectedness between land, nature and informs the relationship of the person to others, to the community and the natural and material world (Grieves, 2009).

Exercising influence: factors and predictors

It is only recently that these themes of community, spirituality and wisdom have become important areas of interest for mainstream Western leadership research (Avolio, Walumba & Weber, 2009). Previously, the focus has been on the influence and motivation of subordinates, and even in transformational accounts of leadership, a dominant concern was in achieving performance beyond expectations at the organisational level (Bass, 1998). Leadership styles of initiating structure and consideration are important to the influence-relationship in the supervisory setting (Fleishman, 1998). Meta-analysis of decades of research has found significant effects of these leadership styles on task performance as well as on a subordinate’s satisfaction with the leader, the subordinate’s job satisfaction and perceived leader effectiveness (Judge, Piccolo & Ilies, 2004).

The emergence of neo-charismatic theories shifted attention away from the transactional relationship between leader and follower and instead focused on the factors that would enable a leader to energise followers to achieve aspirational goals and create radical change and have followers transcend self-interest (Avolio, et al., 2009; Conger, 1999). Overall, however, leadership theory has tended to
convey a very instrumental account of the relationship between leader and follower with the focus
very much on social or economic exchanges.

One possible intersection with indigeneity is spiritual leadership. Important ideas in the definitions of
spiritual leadership include the importance of being able to motivate one’s self and achieve a sense of
meaning in one’s life (Fry, Vitucci & Cedillo, 2005) and being able to value the non-material aspects
of life and comprehend a transcendental dimension to life (Krishnan, 2008). For Indigenous
Australians, the holistic understanding of connectedness has implications for well being, particularly
in relation to connectedness with community (Guerin & Guerin 2012). Aboriginal spirituality informs
understanding of the world and serves as a source of wisdom for Aboriginal people when it is
communicated by elders (Grieves, 2009).

In summary, the main research approaches to understanding Western leadership do not neatly
encapsulate the key themes that have emerged in the study of indigenous leadership (Julien et al.,
2010) namely the emphasis on community orientation, the importance of spirituality in guiding action,
and the focus on the whole person. In addition, Indigenous leaders must enact important cultural
values within a contemporary society in which the pressures of modernity may not readily align with
traditional culture (Sutton, 2001; Julien et al, 2010; Katene, 2010). There are cultural expectations
relating to the allocation of power and the status of women in the indigenous cultural context (Rata,
2011; Wanasika et al, 2011), although increasingly these norms are being challenged. Indigenous
women have voiced their concern at gendered racism and sexism, including sexism within their own
communities (White, 2010). Indigenous women leaders from New Zealand, Australia and Canada
have emphasised that they want their voices to be legitimated and validated ‘in our own words’
(Fitzgerald 2010, p. 102).

In both Australia and New Zealand, Indigenous leaders have become the leader ‘in the middle’
between two societies. They have to enact a form of leadership that can bridge two worlds and
exercise influence in mainstream organisational settings as well as indigenous communities, whether
they are communities dispersed across mainstream urban centres or more geographically identified in remote settlements.

In summary, the research on Indigenous leadership suggests that there are leadership dynamics in indigenous contexts that do not map readily across the domain of transactional models or even the more aspirational neocharismatic approaches. We identified a gap in the literature, in the sense that there was no obvious link between accounts of Indigenous leadership and the practice of leadership in the workplace. An inductive methodology, drawing out common themes and based on the collection of data from a group of Indigenous leaders themselves, seemed the best way forward.

**Research Design**

Our research design was opportunistic in that, through previous research contacts, we had the opportunity to develop a project with the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC). The AILC is unique, in that it is an accredited training institution that is run by and for Indigenous Australians. A not-for-profit body, it is funded both by government and by the private sector.

Students attending AILC courses come from a diverse range of backgrounds and in applying to join the course, must show how this opportunity will benefit their communities. Most, if not all, course participants are attempting to find ways of improving the situation of themselves and their communities: in other words, they are located at the interface between indigenous communities and governance.

Our ‘case’ for the leadership study consisted of a group of students taking part in an AILC Certificate IV leadership course between May and August 2011. Our sampling frame was, de facto, that of the AILC itself. As the AILC aims for gender balance and a balance between states and situations of course participants, a reasonable claim could be made that the participant cohort comprised a representative ‘case’ for the purposes of the study.

**Method**

*Data collection*
An exhaustive ethics approval process was undertaken through UNSW. All participants in the study volunteered to take part. To ensure trust and confidence on both sides, expressions of interest in the project were sought (with the full cooperation of AILC management). The purposes of the project were explained to this group, questions answered and issues discussed. Those who wished to proceed further, then volunteered to be interviewed for the study. The final outcome was that we interviewed, in depth, nine alumni of a 22-member cohort of Indigenous students. All the participants for the AILC courses are selected on the basis of previous leadership experience and a written application outlining the applicant’s understanding of leadership and perceived value of the course to the indigenous community. All participants have to be recognised as a member of an indigenous community.

Selection for the Certificate IV Leadership Course is highly competitive and gaining a place on the course is viewed as an endorsement of the leadership capacity of the course participant. The participants in the current study represented a diverse range of leadership experiences working between indigenous communities and mainstream organisations, principally government funded agencies or centres, as well as Aboriginal committees. The researchers are mindful of the ethical requirements of the study to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of all the participants. As each AILC cohort is small in number and individuals are well known within the AILC network to provide further demographic details would be to risk breaching the ethical requirements of the study.

In addition, we reviewed the applications of all 22 members of the cohort. These gave us background data on each participant, including their level of education, their employment, something of their personal history, why they wanted to do the course, and the outcomes they hoped to achieve from their participation. Using this information, we were able to determine that there seemed to be no selection bias in the attributes of the volunteer group, as distinct from the group as a whole.

Interviews were conducted, wherever possible face-to-face, but some were undertaken by phone. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Interviewees reviewed their transcripts to ensure that the record accurately reflected their message. The material was then analysed using NVivo software.

**Questions for interviews**
Interviews were semi-structured, and questions were designed to explore the specific situation of each leader (see Appendix 1). The question of influence was approached (using a direct question or prompt) at several points during each interview. In addition to asking leaders about their approach to leadership, we also wanted to understand the impact that the AILC Certificate IV course had had on their leadership practice. The broad structure of the course is outlined in Appendix 2. The course is strongly skills-based, and in curriculum terms is very similar to conventional leadership training courses. It is distinguished from these, however, by its holistic approach, and by the ways in which course facilitators, instructors and mentors (all Indigenous) work with each participant to enhance their learning journey and to overcome difficulties and trauma.

**Analysis of interviews**

We used NVivo software to record and analyse the interviews. This part of the work was inductive, in that while we grouped the answers in nodes corresponding to answers to questions, some of the themes emerged from classifying and reclassifying the data so as to capture factors that were common to the greatest number of participants.

Our analysis reported in this paper proceeds in two stages: firstly (after describing the situation and context of our leaders) we report using the emergent node structure from our NVivo analysis. This part of the paper uses words from our interviewees to illustrate the concepts. The second part explores the ways in which our interviewees *constructed* their sense of leadership.

**Situation/Context**

Indigenous Australians are a diverse group, and this diversity was reflected in our interviewees. Some factors, however, came across repeatedly. Many reported difficult childhood and family situations, although in each of these cases there had been elements of stability and strength. Obtaining education and work had been difficult. Families moved around in search of work. Of our nine in-depth interviewees, eight had grown up in rural areas outside major cities and towns. While most subsequently left the areas where they grew up, the place where they came from remained important in both psychological and practical terms.
As adults, our interviewees faced unstable employment situations. As most worked in the public or not-for-profit sectors, they were particularly vulnerable to cuts in public sector expenditures, and to changes in policy. Several volunteers had moved on from their workplaces in the few months following the completion of the leadership course, for these reasons. Others had left their workplaces, but we were unable to trace them.

1 Conception of leader and the way leadership operates

We asked our interviewees a number of questions relating to the way they exercised influence as leaders. Each leader was different (in terms of their work-situation, their priorities and their personalities), but there were some factors in common in the way they worked. It was striking that all our interviewees referred to all of these factors. We have included italicised quotes that give a sense of the speaking voices of our interviewees. The key factors were:

- Being patient and letting people have time to get to know you

          [D]on’t come in with a bulldozer; know who to speak to; don’t just say “we are doing this”, enter into their lives to try and help.

- Leading by example

          Being a role model and being able to get the message across without trying to drive the message.

          There’s a way of doing it, the way you speak, the voices, the light voice not about control, its about empathy, being on their side, not if they are doing the wrong thing, but showing you do care, about people.

- Listening, not going in too strongly

          The biggest thing is about listening and being non-judgemental ... [showing] people that you are there to support them, and help them to make decisions without being forceful, and caring and sharing, and helping them through the hard times.

- Communicating in a straightforward but appropriate manner
Please come along! ‘This is who I am. This is what I want to do… I made the connection. I asked: do you want to come along with me’?

These factors were equally common among male and female interviewees. They speak of a strong cultural influence in relation to acceptable leadership styles among Indigenous Australians working with Indigenous communities or individuals.

2 The leadership task

This theme covers how the objectives of leadership were conceptualised. Responses here varied according to the situation in which our leaders worked. Some had organisational positions which required them specifically to liaise between Indigenous communities or clients and government bureaucracies. These interviewees spoke of being a ‘conduit’ between two worlds; of having to analyse situations and to communicate in ways which were acceptable in the white bureaucracy, while also undertaking the same task (but in quite different ways) in Indigenous communities.

The community wants a leader who can operate effectively in the mainstream and in an Aboriginal context – be a bridge between the two. It’s about being true to an organisation’s objectives, but also to the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people.

Other interviewees were working in more individual ways (for example as youth workers or outreach workers). Here the task was to motivate and inspire others or simply just to keep them going. The task was more obviously personal, and called upon personal reserves of emotional energy and empathy. This flowed over into the way the purposes of leadership were construed. As one interviewee put it ‘I like to see them [ie her young charges] shine’.

3 Sources of Legitimacy

Indigenous communities were unimpressed by official position. Acceptance as a leader was based on knowledge of who you were, and who your people were. The community validated, but also questioned the leader. Where Indigenous leaders were liaising with remote communities, their ability to exercise influence was dependant upon proceeding appropriately and obtaining endorsement from
the leadership group or groups in the communities they were involved with. One woman Indigenous leader had to proceed carefully in addressing groups containing men, who in many remote communities remained in positions of authority. Flexibility was available, but could not be assumed.

People need to know who you are. ‘Who’s your family? That’s how they place you.’

4 Sources of personal strength

Spirituality

Spirituality came into a number of the conversations. One source of spiritual belonging was links to country, of drawing strength from country, even when it was far away.

[M]y spirituality, going home to my country every year, camping, fishing, sitting and just soaking up that country. Knowing the birth areas of my totem and kin is very important to me. It is something I try to instil in my daughter and nieces. Another interviewee spoke of a lived sense of being in communion with family members who had died.

Support of family, mentors and peers

All our interviewees spoke of the importance of family, particularly of family members who had believed in them and inspired them. These were often (although not exclusively) women, who were able to combat significant family dysfunction through hard work and caring. Mentors were less frequently mentioned, but were important in workplace situations, and in providing reference points as networks developed. Mentoring was also a strong feature of the operations of the AILC.

One of the key events in the development of our leaders was the AILC course itself. Participation in the course showed them that they were not alone, and several of our interviewees found that friendships forged through the course had an enduring influence both on their personal development and leadership practice. Through peer-networks that grew out of the course, they were able to continue to draw upon each others’ experiences and support.

Knowledge and confidence
Participation in the AILC course enabled many of our interviewees to see their own potential for the first time. We were repeatedly told how important the course had been in engendering self-confidence. Indeed, some of our interviewees were able to question their own situations and to use the course as a springboard to find more fulfilling employment and/or undertake further education. *The main thing was working with people with like-minded goals and ambitions, most of whom had had to deal with adversity; hearing their stories, and those of others, was inspirational.*

**Analysis: exercising influence and constructing leadership**

Leadership for those ‘in the middle’ represented an evolving set of practices, partly grounded in tradition, but also departing from tradition in important ways. Cultural norms had to be respected, but it was also necessary to operate effectively in ‘white’ bureaucratic environments, where authority came from the top, and leadership and management requirements often revolved around process and procedure (Hill, Wakerman, Matthews & Gibson, 2001).

More generally, what does our work say about the importance of ‘culture’ in the understanding of leadership? The GLOBE cultural typology enables commonalities and differences between leadership approaches to be drawn across cultures (Javidan et al, 2006). In view of the importance of community in the cultural mindset of aboriginal leaders across the world, it is likely that the implicit leadership theory of Australian Aboriginal leaders would emphasise the two orientations of ‘humaneness’ and ‘in-group’ collectivism. However, these comparisons remain broad brush rather than context-specific and sole reliance on them for analysing cross cultural leadership orientations is likely to minimise contextual differences.

Our interviewees exercised influence in ways that seemed to transcend the available leadership models. We concluded that our interviewees were in the process of *constructing* new forms of leadership. Beneath the themes we identified inductively, there were emergent questions relating to the purpose of leadership, identity and culture.

*Purpose of the leader*
As our sample highlighted, Aboriginal leadership is about meeting the needs of the entire community and about connecting community to the past. It is also about leading a life filled with purpose. Responsibility might take different forms at different times. For some leaders, it meant guiding others, particularly young people, in some instances saving them from the effects of neglect, violence and disadvantage. For others, responsibility meant showing management skill and professionalism in white organisations – that they could ‘cut it’ in competitive, demanding situations.

**Who am I?**

Development as a leader meant self-development. Our interviewees were at different stages on this journey. Some were discovering their Indigeneity in an active way for the first time; for others it had always been a central part of who they were, so fundamental as not to require any particular discussion. Working in (largely white) organisations required techniques for consolidation and advancement in situations that were often unstable – for women leaders, nurturing home and networks while meeting professional challenges could be particularly demanding. But for all our interviewees Indigeneity was itself a work in progress. We concluded, with Merlan, that Indigeneity is not a fixed concept, but evolves in relation to processes of interaction and differentiation.

**Link to community**

The concept of connecting, rather than dividing or differentiating, is central to Aboriginal leadership – the Indigenous leader has to be patient to be accepted by their community before being able to influence. This theme is also strongly evident in work on women indigenous leaders in North America and in New Zealand (Kenny and Fraser 2012; Fitzgerald, 2010) although we would argue that the New Zealand context (as reported by Fitzgerald) is more specifically (and consciously) bi-cultural than the Australian one. No one model captures the richness of each specific situation. While there are resonances with servant leadership models, there are also important questions of legitimacy that are not encapsulated by this approach. Our Indigenous leaders were not working by sharing power – rather, they were serving their communities by discovering and enacting influence.

**Conclusion: a new paradigm?**
Australian Indigenous leaders are exploring both individual and collective identities as a personal resource for the leader. Individual identity is based on family, mentors and peers as key factors in personal development and in generating and maintaining confidence. Individual and collective identities are linked through a process of legitimation. Where you come from is the basis of acceptance among other Aboriginal people. The ongoing ‘us’, however, includes other Indigenous people in an evolving set of networked relationships. For all our participants, their continuing engagement with the AILC and with each other sustained their emerging practice and helped them through difficult times.

We found commonalities and differences between Australian indigenous leadership, as revealed by our interviewees, and the results of work on indigenous leaders in Canada by researchers such as Jules and Julien. Common factors included the emphasis on the relational aspects of leadership, respect for the wisdom of elders and the importance of the personal qualities of the leader. But our Indigenous Australians were working in situations of greater ambiguity, in which traditional sources of influence and legitimacy could not be taken for granted. Like the indigenous Canadian, Australian and New Zealand women leaders interviewed by Fitzgerald (2010), our leaders (both male and female) were negotiating ‘spaces in between’ two societies. Even so, our impression was that our Australian Aboriginal leaders were operating out of a less structured leadership tradition than their Canadian or Maori counterparts.

The emerging Australian indigenous model leadership does not deny the importance of conventional forms of leadership reasoning and behaviour. But it does suggest that where you come from is not (as many white Australians might suppose) a limiting factor, but in the hands of those who have been able to overcome initial disadvantage and set themselves on a path of personal growth, an important source of strength. Further research is needed to develop this model, and to contextualise it in relation to the standard leadership literature.
References


Appendix 1

Interview questions

1. Can you tell us about how you came to be involved with AILC?
2. Can you tell us a bit more about yourself? Where you grew up and your schooling.
3. What are the things you are doing at the moment?
4. What experiences have you had working with government officials?
5. What sort of outcomes were achieved in the community?
6. Did you learn much from what happened?
7. Do you see yourself as a leader? What does being a leader mean for you?
8. Who has helped you most in being able to contribute to leadership?
9. Who do you see as leaders in your community?
10. What good things do you associate with being a leader? Any bad things?
11. What are some of the challenges facing a leader in an indigenous community?
12. What was the impact of the AILC course on your development as a leader?
Appendix 2

Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership: course details from AILC website

About the Course

The following Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership course is targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. The Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre (AILC) is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) offering nationally recognised training.

The Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership is targeted at those in leadership management positions, or those looking to step into leadership management positions within their workplace or community. It exposes them to leadership models and styles and how these impact on the community, with an emphasis on developing personal, professional and community leadership. This accredited training gives participants the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to further develop their leadership capabilities. This is a fully funded course. The AILC will cover tuition, materials, travel, accommodation and meals for 25 selected participants.

Course Purpose

The Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership builds on current leadership skills and further develops important qualities and knowledge. It assists students to identify their own strengths in order to plan their leadership journeys. It establishes pathways to further education, and is an entry point to tertiary studies.

Course Goals

The Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership aims to equip students with an array of competency-based tools to address policy, management and administrative issues including quality service delivery and capacity development of groups, organisations and communities.

Core Topics and Skill Development
• Refinement of leadership skills
• Maintaining and protecting culture
• Building partnerships with stakeholders
• Promoting team effectiveness
• Managing conflict
• Managing stress
• Strategic planning
• Continuing your leadership journey
• Working within communities
• Expanding networks
• Health aspects of Indigenous leadership
• Promotion through the media
• Making a presentation

Is the Certificate IV course accredited?

Yes, this course is accredited. Upon successful completion of course requirements, students will receive the award of Certificate IV in Indigenous Leadership. All students will receive an Academic Transcript listing the units achieved.

Trainers

Our trainers are experienced Indigenous people with specific areas of expertise or non-Indigenous specialists with Indigenous training experience. This ensures unique, high quality, culturally appropriate courses.

Leadership development

AILC courses develop the capacity of individuals to take on personal, community, work and family leadership roles by assisting them to recognise their current leadership skills and to identify further
potential aspirations and work towards achieving these, through the development of a vision and plan. The courses assist individuals to improve their confidence to seek and take opportunities by providing a safe learning environment in which to practice.