

Leadership Development in a Faith-based Non-profit Organization using a Relational Leadership Model: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a case study of a Leadership Development Program (LDP) which has been developed and conducted at a large faith-based non-profit organization providing aged and community care in Australia. Walter Wright's Relational Leadership model which used insights from Jude, Philemon and Colossians was adopted by the organization. Started as a pilot in 2003 the LDP was implemented in 2007 and has been run regularly since then. The LDP was systematically evaluated by an independent researcher recently. The evaluation concluded that the program has been effective and recommended that it continue with some minor modifications. The organization in which this program was developed is a partner in an Australian Research Council (ARC) linkage grant started in 2010 between three universities and two faith-based non-profit organizations providing aged care and community care. This paper has been written by four researchers involved in the linkage grant. Four interviews on participants in the LDP were conducted by the authors to evaluate the effectiveness of the leadership program in order to prepare this paper. The study was carried out to clarify the research aim for the principal author (who is a PhD student in the ARC grant) by trying to understand what the LDP program was aiming to achieve and to be presented at the Spirituality at Work conference at the University of Arkansas.

Keywords: *Leadership, Relational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Leadership Development, Aged-Care, Organization.*

INTRODUCTION

The research described in this paper forms a small part of a three year research project currently being undertaken into the development of a leadership capability framework for not-for-profit Australian aged and community care organizations. The research is funded by the Australian Research Council and industry bodies, and is a linkage project between two industry and three academic institutions. The need to conduct this larger body of research arose as a result of the lack of research in Australia in leadership capability development in the health and community sectors among not-for-profit organizations (Sankaran et al., 2006). The results from such a study are expected to contribute to knowledge that would be beneficial to all non-profit organizations providing services to the public in an environment in which both the private and public sectors play a role in Australian society.

The Leadership Development Program (LDP) investigated in this study is run regularly in one of the partner organizations of the larger study. This program was initiated by the organization before the larger study was started. The PhD student was selected by the organization to work in the research study and she wanted to understand what her organization was trying to achieve through the LDP program so that her own doctoral research (which will be part of the larger study) can benefit her organization. The case study reported in the paper helped her to identify her PhD research topic.

The Leadership Development Program was developed and implemented around four years ago by a faith-based not-for-profit aged-care organization on the east coast of Australia. It was initiated by the then CEO as a program for young leaders, a Christian values-based program to develop emerging leaders. It was soon expanded to include senior managers. The program is underpinned by the ideas of Relational Leadership as espoused by Walter Wright (2009). Relational Leadership in turn draws on the Servant Leadership of Greenleaf (1977). This program (the LDP), if found to be effective, will be an integral part of an eventual leadership framework developed by the larger research paper. The small scale research conducted for this paper sought to explore the effectiveness of the LDP among a selected pivotal and influential group.

The organization

The organization studied here is a not-for-profit Christian aged-care organization with 3,600 staff members and an annual budget of nearly US\$200m. It was established in 1944 by a group of church members who wanted to express the love of Christ in practical ways to people in need, particularly the aged and children. The organization now runs 160 facilities and programs across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. It is one of Australia's most respected care providers, serving the aged and people living with disadvantage.

The Vision, Mission and Values of the organization

This organization's vision, mission and values statements are constantly stated, referred to and reinforced and form part of the leadership program described in this paper. They are displayed on the walls throughout the organization's offices and facilities, are printed in all of the organization's publications and positions vacant advertisements both internal and external, and are discussed at length during each staff member's orientation and at staff seminars and meetings. This is an organization that endeavors every day to 'walk the talk'. Its vision, mission and values are as follows:

Vision

To be a passionate innovative Christian organisation bringing life-transforming care to our clients.

Mission

To express Christ's love as we serve individuals, families and people in the community who have unmet spiritual, emotional or physical needs.

Values

- Mutual respect and trust in all relationships
- Integrity and the highest ethical standards
- Stewardship of the resources and responsibilities in our care
- Communication that is open, consistent and two-way

- Continuous improvement in all that we do
- Performance with recognition for results
- Creativity, cooperation and commitment in our workplace

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of leadership theories

A brief review of articles in the journal *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* found that the majority of papers dealing with leadership focused on leadership at the Board or governance level. Bush (2002) points out that leadership impacts on effective non-profit management. He argues that an NPO's leadership should have a clear sense of vision, clear mission and a set of objectives, but he does not discuss how these could be developed. Alexander et al. (2001) propose a leadership model for a community care network that is collaborative and not based on authority and hierarchy. None of the papers reviewed discussed a leadership framework for NPOs, leadership competency and capability, or leadership requirements of Senior Operational Managers working in NPOs.

The thinking around theories of leadership has evolved during the twentieth century, considerably spurred on by the worldwide turmoil of wars, economic depression and recession, social and political instability and mass migration.

Six broad views of leadership have risen and fallen in favor in lockstep with improving educational levels coupled with a move from cottage and factory based industrial economies towards service based economies. These six views are briefly discussed here.

The great or heroic man

All societies throughout history have had leaders who provided for and protected members of their group, who journeyed to faraway lands and plundered the treasures of other groups, who displayed great wisdom or interpreted the will of God. Some were brutal, others measured and kindly. Many performed heroic deeds and were elevated, admired or feared by their fellows. Heroic leaders seemed somehow born to rule, larger than life, having innate qualities that set them apart from others.

Trait theories

The qualities of heroic leaders led to the development of lists of specific traits, characteristics or qualities attributed to leaders (Stogdill, 1974). Typically the following traits were included in most lists: intelligence, assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence, integrity, confidence and ambition. The thought was that if someone demonstrated these qualities, it followed that they would be a good leader. Trait theory was an early development which gradually lost prominence. However, it experienced a resurgence towards the end of the 20th century, with Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) identifying six traits of leaders: drive, motivation to lead, honesty and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability, and knowledge of the business.

There were several problems with trait theories. The first was that dozens of traits were identified and clearly not every leader had every trait, raising the possibility of a three-tiered system of essential, desirable and non-essential but handy traits. The second

problem was that the qualities exhibited by leaders depended to a large extent on who they were leading and the situation they found themselves in. Further, just as a list of the characteristics of a cow could be interpreted as a horse, the sum of the leadership ‘parts’ did not necessarily add up to a great leader. Finally, this view of leadership led to the myth of the ‘super boss’, exhibiting the perfect combination of leadership characteristics, who single-handedly turns the struggling company around, and we lost sight of all those in the background who provided valuable support to the single hero (McGee-Cooper and Trammell, 2002).

Behavioral theories

These theories sought to analyze what individual leaders do with the personal traits, skills and capabilities they have and attempted to identify and compare the behaviors of effective and ineffective leaders, especially relationship-oriented and task-oriented behaviors. This led to ‘different patterns of behavior being observed and categorized as “styles of leadership”’ (Bolden et al., 2003). However, Robbins et al. (2003) argue that these theories could not prove that specific patterns of leadership resulted in successful performance. Among these theories there was also a consideration of aspects of leadership that can be learned. The focus of behavior theorists on situational influences led to the contingency theories of leadership.

Situational leadership and contingency theory

These postulated that performance of a group was dependent on a leader’s preferred style, the capability and behavior of followers and the extent to which the situation was favorable to the leader. Contingency theories were based on Fiedler’s (1967) contingency model, Hersey and Blanchard’s (1974) situational leadership model, Vroom and Yetton’s (1973) leadership participation model and House’s (1972) path-goal theory. These models either matched leadership style to situations, matched leaders to the ‘maturity’ of their followers, or integrated task, relations and change oriented behaviors. Contingency theorists argued that there is no one best way of leadership as it depends on the situation, that situational variables actually moderate the relationship between the leader’s attributes and behaviors, and the leader’s effectiveness. In this model, context is everything. A leader who is highly successful in one situation might fail miserably in another.

Research into leadership has provided support for contingency theories, however contingency theories do not take into account the possibility that a leader could also change the situation.

Yukl (2006) has proposed an integrated model for leadership research that combines several of these approaches as shown in Figure 1.

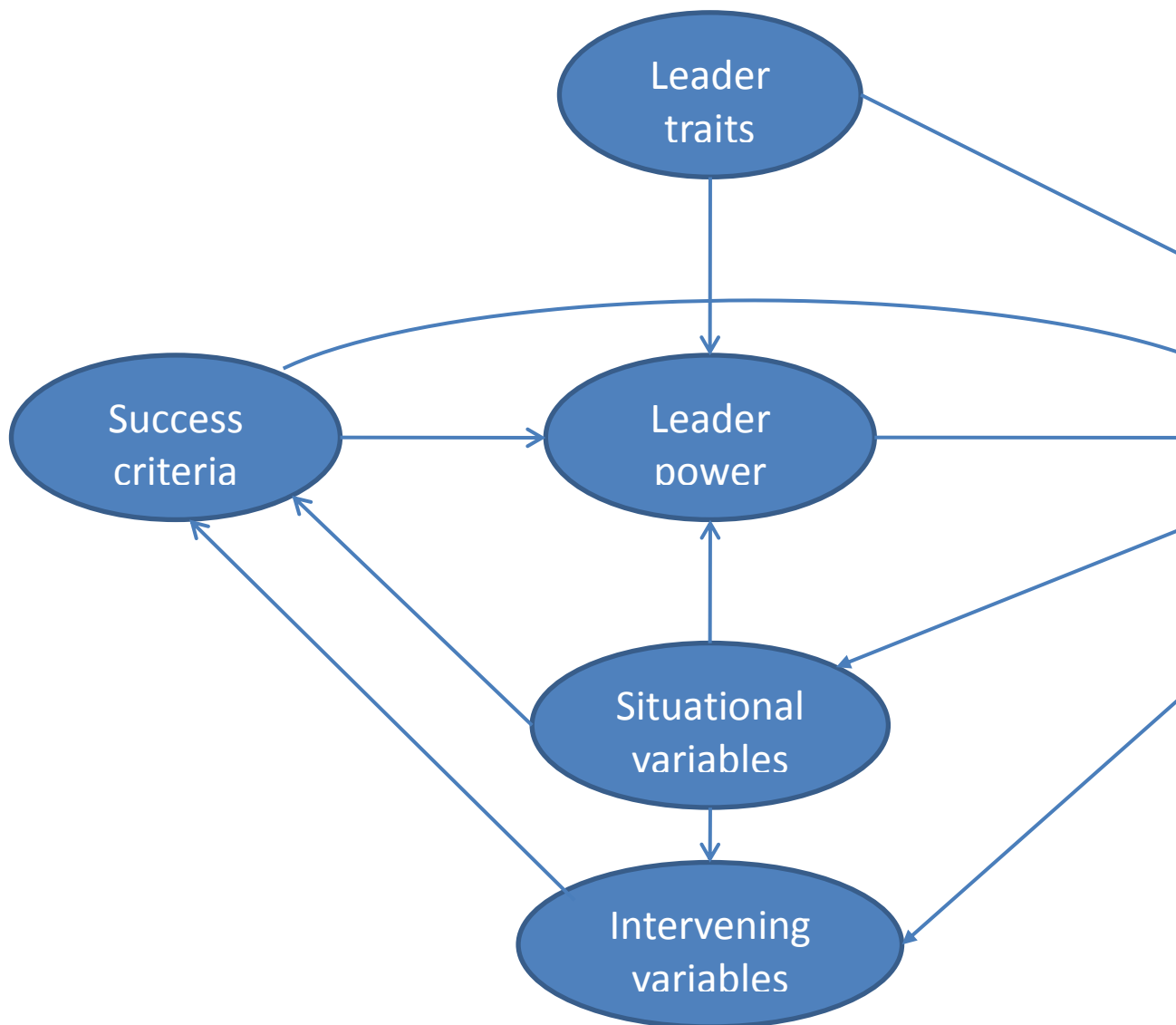


Figure 1: Integrated Leadership Model (Yukl, 2006)

In addition to the four major approaches to leadership two models are often used to differentiate between leaders who are closer to managers in the manager↔leader spectrum and leaders who are at the leader end of the spectrum. These are Transactional and Transformational leadership.

Transactional theory

Transactional leaders and their followers are in an ‘exchange’ relationship (Burns, 1978). The relationship focuses on mutual benefits: rewards or recognition from the leaders, and commitment or loyalty from the followers (Bolden et al., 2003). Leaders typically concentrate on each follower’s performance and take corrective action if the

follower fails to perform, or do nothing until problems arise and they need to take corrective action (Bass and Bass, 2008).

The hallmark of transactional leadership is the followers' recognition of the leader and acceptance of authority in exchange for valuable resources.

Transformational theory

This new theory emerged in the late twentieth century. Transformational leaders transform individuals, groups, organizations and societies (Bass and Bass, 2008). By presenting goals to followers as a compelling vision, they inspire followers to put aside their self-interest for the sake of the organization and can have a lasting impact on their value systems and ambition levels leading to intrinsically sustained behavior change among followers.

The capacity to transform or act as a change agent seems to be a key requirement for modern leaders to lead organizations in a turbulent environment.

Recently new models of leadership have caught the attention of leadership scholars – authentic leadership, servant leadership, relational leadership and spiritual leadership, to name a few. The relational leadership model described in this paper is based on a servant leader model developed by Wright (2009). It has elements of spiritual leadership as it is based on biblical models as well as authentic leadership.

Limitations of Leadership in the not-for-profit sector

Not-for-profit faith-based organizations have historically sought staff members who agree to work within and indeed openly promote their mission and values. Membership of an appropriate church has been more highly valued when recruiting, especially for higher level positions, than leadership potential.

The past few years in aged care in Australia have been tumultuous as there have been fundamental changes that impact on every aspect of the care we give the frail aged. These changes have included the way the government funds aged care, the increasing age and declining health of our clients, staffing shortages and leadership in crisis. Supporting the ageing population has thus put increasing strain on the public purse.

Managing changes requires firm strong committed leadership. Despite the recent changes in the aged care sector, there has been a failing in not-for-profit faith-based organizations, who dominate this sector, to put time, money and effort into developing leaders at every level throughout the organization. When a leader retires or leaves, precious time and resources are wasted in a desperate bid to find a suitable replacement.

Siddiqi (2001) writes of the importance of non-government organizations to develop 'second-line leaders', leaders in the wings from within the organization already trained and developed to replace the existing leader. He explains that 'there is [a] need to maintain an optimum level of continuity of their vision, mission and values' (p.5). Succession planning is, of course, expensive but cost-effective in the long run. However a delicate balance must be sought between ensuring that the leader-in-waiting is ready to take the reins and making him wait too long for his chance to lead thereby losing him to another organization.

As this paper describes a case study of a faith-based NPO which has adopted a relational leadership model based on servant leadership, we will briefly discuss these models.

Relational Leadership or Relational Servant Leadership

In Matthew 20: 26-7, Jesus said that to be a leader, one must be a servant.

The emergence of servant leadership is often attributed to Robert Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive who proposed that service should be the distinguishing characteristic of the leader (Greenleaf, 1977). In his seminal text on servant leadership he advocates that the primary purpose of business should be to create a positive impact on its employees and community. The servant leader brings together service and meaning – the leader is attuned to basic spiritual values and, in serving them serves others including colleagues, the organization and society. Fry (2003) outlines a framework for servant leadership which consists of ‘helping others discover their inner spirit, earning and keeping others’ trust, service over self-interest, and effective listening’ (p. 708). Spears (2004) who did a study of Greenleaf’s writings concluded that a servant leader exhibits ten characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment and building community.

Although Wright (2009) mentions Greenleaf in his book, he states five principles of servant leaders based on theology, some of which are similar to Greenleaf’s writings. The principles listed by Wright are:

1. Influence and service. The influence must have a purpose that is often the shared mission of the group or organization.
2. Vision and hope, a relationship of influence that points people to a shared vision, empowering them.
3. Character and trust grounded in the faith, beliefs, commitment and values of a leader.
4. Relationships and power with a warning that power should not be misused but be directed towards the mission of the community.
5. Dependency and accountability, emphasizing that leaders need followers.

Wright (2009) defines leadership as ‘a relationship in which one person seeks to influence the thoughts, behaviors, belief, or values of another person’.

For Wright (2009) leadership starts with God, as theology shapes character which fuels leadership. Through the values and beliefs promoted by the leader an organization develops a culture to cope with its environment. The organizational culture clarifies the expectations of people who work for an organization and results in action taken to deliver organizational outcomes. Leadership is also responsible for creating a vision and leading the organization towards its mission through values and relationships.

CASE STUDY

Purpose

This case study provided an opportunity for the primary author to identify and refine the research direction for her doctoral studies. As a participant in the leadership research being carried out under the linkage grant, she was immediately drawn to the voice of the

consumer in aged care and the nature of the change that will occur after 2020 when the Baby Boomers begin to enter aged care facilities.

A pilot study five years ago indicated strongly that leadership was a very strong topic among managers in two not-for-profit Faith-based organizations (Org1 and Org2) in Australia. The pilot sought to establish what leaders and managers want and need from the organization. Three universities (U1, U2 and U3) are now involved in the development of a leadership framework.

After the initial pilot study, the Australian Research Council grant was applied for and won. The authors of this paper are drawn from Org 1, Org 2, U1 and U2. The author from U1 is the Supervisor of author Org1.

Leadership Development Program

The Leadership Development Program (LDP) described in this paper was established in a faith-based organization to build future leaders for succession planning in 2003/4. As the initial program received good support across the organization it was developed into a corporate development program in 2007. Up until 2010 when the program was evaluated, several workshops were conducted in which senior and middle managers participated. The program will consist of three modules when fully developed, with module 1 emphasizing the organizational vision, mission and culture. Module 2 focuses on personal development as well as leading teams. The third module is in the development phase at present and will focus on how to work with others, the stakeholders.

The organization recently engaged an independent researcher to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of the program and the program was found to be effective and the organization was urged to continue the program with some suggested modifications.

METHODS

Participants

For the purposes of writing this paper the primary author decided to interview just four participants whose different perspectives and experience of the LDP would present a snapshot of the program.

The sample used in the interviews was chosen purposively to capture a rich and diverse variety of information and opinions to present this case study of the Leadership Development Program implemented by this organization.

The subjects were homogenous in that they are practising Christians, a requirement of the organization for managers at these levels. Furthermore they are in roles considered to be leadership roles and have hands-on experience of the LDP.

However the subjects were also chosen for variation of their potential viewpoint on the LDP including, as we did, a senior manager and a facility manager both of whom have taken part in the LDP, the manager of the learning unit who implements the program, and the past CEO who was instrumental in instigating and then encouraging development of the program. Variation has also been achieved by selecting both genders and different age groups.

	Subject A	Subject B	Subject C	Subject D
Gender and approximate age	Male 40+	Female 50+	Female 40+	Female 60+
Position	Regional Manager	Facility Manager	Manager, Learning Unit	Past CEO
LDP status	Completed parts 1 and 2 of the program	Completed part 1 of the program	Involved in implementation	Involved in development
Length of time with the organization	4 years	3 years	6 years	14 years

Table 1. The case study participants.

The procedure – Convergent Interviewing

Separate interviews were conducted with three current members of this organization and one past member, using a Convergent Interviewing technique.

Convergent interviewing is an interviewing technique that allows us to define the most salient issues and is used especially when there is some doubt about the information to be collected (Dick, 1998). It can yield good results from small, diverse samples and achieves this by leaving much of the content unstructured, as the only predetermined question is the opening question. Later ‘probe’ questions are determined from interview to interview. Data is analysed systematically as it is gathered, helping to improve efficiency and reduce bias.

The procedure followed here was to set the person being interviewed at ease, ask the opening question, keep the person talking, invite a summary, follow up on doubtful or ambiguous issues and ask probe questions to seek out further information if necessary.

The questions asked were:

Open question <i>Tell me about the leadership program that the organization offers</i>
Probe or follow-up questions <i>What difference do you think the program has made to you and the way you think about and do your job?</i> <i>What difference do you think the program has made to staff as a result of your participation?</i> <i>What difference do you think the program has made to our residents/clients?</i> <i>Will the program be altered in any way by the new CEO? Is the CEO the main driver or does the program have its own steam now?</i> <i>Does the program help in recruitment of senior staff?</i> <i>Is there anything else you want to say or add to the discussion?</i>

Prior to the interview ethical processes were observed by explaining the purpose of the interviews, seeking interviewees’ agreement to be interviewed, choosing an appropriate location convenient to the participant and assuring anonymity. As the interviews

progressed probe questions were asked. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

The interviews were not transcribed but detailed notes were taken throughout. The interviews were individually analysed by two of the authors, then coded, compared and discussed before arriving at common themes.

DISCUSSION

Convergent interviewing worked well for this study. It enabled us to use only a small sample and yet gain an insight into the effect that the LDP has had on its participants, what they gained from it, its future development and the impact it is having on the organization as a whole. Dick's (1998) enjoiner to use a small but diverse sample did indeed yield good results. The population that has experienced the LDP is a relatively small one, the managers in the organization. Each of our subjects was in a different management role. Possible bias was addressed by choosing as diverse a sample as possible however these people are not, overall, a very diverse group as explained above. The researcher's possible bias is addressed to a large extent by the interviewing technique. Convergent interviewing allows and encourages the subject to speak freely after just one opening question or statement. Probe or follow-up questions are used only to prompt if the subject is not addressing the research aims or meanders off the point. As saturation was reached by the conclusion of the fourth interview, it is unlikely that a larger sample size would have yielded further information.

After analysis of the interviews, four major themes were identified. The first theme was that the program was designed to change the culture of the organization from one which paid lip-service to Christianity, to one with a prominent Christian culture, largely through study of Wright's (2009) text *Relational Leadership*, subtitled *A Biblical Model for Leadership Service*. This is directly related to the Vision of the organization - 'to be a passionate innovative Christian organisation bringing life-transforming care to our clients':

- *'The need for it grew out of the first staff survey – leadership wasn't as effective as it could be, not walking the talk' 'Working within a Christian organisation...what the organisation is striving to be, to operate in accordance with its mission' 'Making the mission and values tangible' 'It has become very much a part of how we do everything' 'Drawing upon Biblical characters who demonstrate leadership' (Subject A)*
- *'There's this desire to serve God and to serve man, and give good care to the elderly' 'I'm a pastoral leader' (Subject B)*
- *'The basic philosophy of the program was to change the culture of the organisation' (Subject C)*
- *'We needed to be unashamedly Christian, this was the language I used' 'it's a Christian organisation and this is how we expect everybody to behave' 'to make sure all managers shared the same vision for the organisation' (Subject D)*

A second major theme was the immense support of and satisfaction in the program across all levels of the organization, the championing of it by the past and present CEOs and the training manager, and support from participants and even other staff. The

manager who was involved in developing and delivering the program talked about the success of the program and noted that the program was not abandoned after the CEO who initiated it left the organization. It enjoyed the full support of the new CEO who was one of the sponsors of the program under the previous CEO.

- *'Its success has been reflected in the Staff Surveys'* (Subject A)
- *'as a result of the LDP I have blossomed as a person' 'I'm getting affirmation that people are responding well to my leadership style'* (Subject B)
- *'the people who participated loved the program' 'the program is well supported'* (Subject C)
- *'people have been passionate about the need for an LDP' 'the Christian foundations ... are so embedded now that I don't think that will change'* (Subject D)

A third theme was that the program helped managers to identify their own leadership style, helped them move towards becoming a relational leader, strongly incorporated the mission and values of the faith-based organization into each manager's unique leadership style and improved their ability to lead effectively. Further, as two managers had come from a for-profit background, the program helped them adapt to a different culture where the bottom line was not the dominant driver. Rather, 'expressing Christ's love' was fundamental as stated in the values of the organization. Also, participants were able to adapt more readily to working with people whose leadership style was at variance with their own.

- *'An inventory was used to highlight leadership, management and interpersonal style' 'Managers now know their strengths and weaknesses'* (Subject A)
- *'I had issues with my leadership ... [that] I needed to address ... I was encouraged that I could change my leadership style' 'made me stop and think about some of the ways I'd managed' 'Zeroing in on the Mission and Values, but even more on Servant Leadership' 'I did a lot of growing and learning'* (Subject B)
- *'the second module is about self – how to lead teams, how to balance competing interests'* (Subject C)
- *'to make sure that everyone had the same approach to leadership' 'we wanted people to have the chance to explore different types of leadership and what the advantages were if you could build a relational focus to how you manage your team rather than just being authoritarian'* (Subject D)

A fourth theme was the importance of evaluating LDP modules 1 and 2 to justify the program's continuation as it was acknowledged that the program is costly to run. This reflects the organization's third value statement of 'stewardship of the resources and responsibilities in our care'. The independent evaluation carried out in 2010 found that the overall response to the LDP is very positive.

- *'It's a very important program for our organisation and has wide-ranging support'* (Subject A)
- *'The whole Strategic Leadership Team feels that as many of the managers should attend it as possible'* (Subject B)

- *'It was found to be effective by an independent researcher'* (Subject C)
- *'It has to be achieving what we wanted to achieve'* (Subject D)

All subjects mentioned each of the four major themes. Overwhelmingly, the shift in organizational culture to an overtly Christian organization was most strongly voiced. This has implications for other organizations with a Christian background. It is possible and even desirable to focus on the Mission and still lead a thriving organization. There appears to be no mission-market tension.

Other important points were raised by individual participants. Some of these follow.

- Although all agreed on the benefits to the organization, it was not clear that the benefits flowed on to the residents or clients.
- One subject stated that there is a need for an ongoing mentoring program for our leaders to provide direction for gaining further knowledge and for reassurance.
- One subject felt that Board members would benefit from taking the first module.
- Two subjects noted the continuity in support for the LDP despite the change of CEO.
- It was explained by the manager of training that the program has so far emphasized organizational culture and personal development. In the next phase it will develop managers to be effective with others.

From the discussion with the participants it became clear that while the program was based on Wright's (2009) writing on relational leadership, servant leadership was the important thread and there were elements of authentic leadership and spiritual leadership embedded in the program. Furthermore, an organisational culture encompassing servant leadership was an effective way of nurturing not only staff or followers, but the leaders themselves.

Relational leadership would seem to provide a suitable framework to enable leaders to handle and guide change by providing a supportive environment. If, in the future, the LDP is supplemented by an ongoing mentoring program for leaders, this will serve to strengthen the foundation already laid.

CONCLUSIONS

The Leadership Development Program employed by this faith-based organization based on relational leadership appears to be working and continuing to enjoy top management support. The benefits for the organization are very clear.

There is great support for the program from its participants and a positive flow-on effect to the staff generally. The model used in the program exhibits synergy with the organization's Christian values and its Vision, Mission Statement and Values. The program seems to work well across a range of managers based on their roles and age. Active participation in the development program by senior management has been instrumental in gaining organization wide support for the program. The program is going ahead to implement a new phase.

The benefits for residents and clients are still to be ascertained and this is worthy of consideration for further research. This was one of the gaps that the principal author found from her investigations and will now form the basis for her doctoral studies. What clearly emerged from the study was that one of the major aims of the LDP program was unifying the culture of the organization around Christian values. The primary author will be using instruments to study the culture of the organization as viewed by the residents and clients to establish whether the Leadership Development Program is thought by consumers to produce a culture change, and to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the LDP from the viewpoint of the Voice of the Consumer.

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