

Best Practice Principles in Leadership Development Interventions: An Australian Perspective

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This paper explores the extent and nature of organizational compliance with best practice in leadership development initiatives. The purpose is to identify whether learning and development managers are following best practice principles in the design and delivery of leadership development initiatives. A self-administered survey instrument in the form of a questionnaire was mailed to three hundred and seventy-nine (379) learning and development managers in Australian companies. One hundred and thirteen (113) usable questionnaires were returned. Finds a high level of compliance among the surveyed companies to most best practice principles. A sizable minority of respondents indicated minimal compliance to several principles. There are implications for practitioners who design and deliver leadership development initiatives and for those who outsource their leadership development to third parties. Many companies could have opportunities to improve the quality and integrity of their leadership development initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary challenges organizations face when they seek to develop their leadership, especially more senior leaders, is convincing these people that they are in need of professional development (Jones *et al.*, 2006). While it is generally regarded as the norm that regular employees require ongoing development, once people ascend to leading others there can develop a mindset, often common among leaders, that they do not or should not require 'training'. In fact they do, and their needs relate to both personal growth and job competency development (Preece and Iles, 2009). Organizations which seek to evolve and to compete must continue to develop the capacity of their leaders to lead well in spite of any overt or covert efforts on the part of those leaders to avoid what they often perceive as unneeded training.

It is difficult to write a prescription for what constitutes excellence in leadership development. Variables such as work context; learning objectives; industry; participant composition and numerous other considerations might well result in contrasting leadership interventions of equal worth. Nevertheless, the literature does largely agree on some of the critical components of a good leadership development initiative. Haskins and Shaffer (2009), for example, identify twelve best practice principles of a good leadership development program. These principles include: winning CEO support; conducting a needs analysis; having a clearly defined target audience and ensuring thorough post-intervention review and analysis. Other scholars concur; some of these principles are repeated in numerous other papers. Perhaps, then, while the content and delivery mode for leadership development interventions will vary, the design, implementation and management of leadership development activities should conform to a

quality assurance-driven process which includes some important steps. In this sense, at least, it is possible to define some key ingredients for excellence in leadership development.

Leadership development in contemporary organizations assumes many different forms. Coaching has become a popular form of leadership development, especially for more senior leaders (Jones *et al.*, 2006) while other organisations send some select leaders to retreats or academies for their professional development (Preece and Iles, 2009). It is also the case that leadership development learning methodology can be mixed for a richer and perhaps more challenging or holistic leadership experience. Queensland Health, for example, has for the past twelve years simultaneously used short and long formal workshops; self-paced online learning modules; 360 degree feedback; coaching and web-based support to develop its clinical and non-clinical leaders (Crethar, 2011). Similarly, Philips, the electronic consumer goods multinational, has a leadership program which utilizes classroom sessions; experiential learning through collaborative project work; coaching and action learning activities (Korde *et al.*, 2011).

This research project is not concerned with distinguishing between the various forms or delivery modes of leadership initiatives as the evidence suggests that best practice principles can and should apply to whatever leadership initiative an organization has chosen to invest in. Suffice it to say here; leadership modes vary significantly, and that is acknowledged, yet best practice principles are a constant. It is the application of best practice to leadership planning, design, delivery and management with which the current project is concerned.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Best Practice Principles in Leadership Development

There exists no single, definitive list of principles that define excellence in leadership development initiatives. It is interesting, however, that there are a number of principles which are often repeated throughout the leadership literature irrespective of the nature of the leadership development program. It suggests relatively widespread, general agreement on a number of important principles that good leadership development activities should encompass. While the purpose here is not to be too prescriptive or to attempt to create a checklist against which leadership initiatives must measure up, it is to identify some standards of excellence. These standards will provide the benchmarks against which the participating organizations can be evaluated for best practice compliance.

Assessing Learner and Organizational Needs

The first principle for quality leadership development initiatives commonly referred to in the literature is that organizations must objectively assess their leadership development needs through an organizational review. The purpose of this review, or needs analysis, is primarily to identify leadership skill and knowledge gaps across the organization so that the leadership development initiative is targeted at meeting the specific needs of the organization. Addison and Cunningham (2006) suggest the needs analysis not merely identify current competencies leaders have but also determine whether these competencies are adequate to serve the business. They also suggest that inadequate competencies, not only missing competencies, are identified and subsequently addressed in the leadership development initiative that follows.

As organizations are continuously developing and having to face new challenges, leadership competencies, as Addison and Cunningham (2006) note, that serve the business, must be future-focused. Therefore, a good needs analysis will not just determine competency gaps that exist today, but the competency needs of the organization over the coming few years. Conducting a thorough, objective needs analysis helps the organization invest in leadership in a strategic way that maximises the value of the

initiative to the business. Without a needs analysis, the organization is just guessing about its leadership competency deficiencies or perhaps merely running a generic 'off-the-shelf' program and hoping for the best. Such an approach lacks strategic intent. Not only would it represent a poor financial investment for the organization but leadership deficiencies would still be likely to persist and this would threaten the future ambitions of the organization. Davis and Callahan (2012) have gone further on the

topic of assessing leadership competency needs by stating that an individual needs analysis for each leader should be conducted. They state that, especially at the senior level, leaders often have quite different needs depending upon their professional backgrounds and that these specific development needs should be catered to. Some studies (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013; Bowles *et al.*, 2007) have shown that coaching have shown, for example, that coaching is an effective leadership development activity for focusing on and developing individual needs in leaders.

Delivering the Program

The next guiding principle for leadership development in organizations is well summarised by Allio (2005) who asserts that while leadership cannot be taught, it can be learned. Allio goes on to say that leadership is best learned through deliberate acts of leadership (practice). The advice for leadership development planners here is that people cannot be instructed how to be leaders. Therefore, classical teaching methodology such as that which has traditionally dominated schools and universities - classroom-based, instructor-led, content-heavy, knowledge-imparting - is not, it is widely contended, an effective way to structure leadership development activities. In essence, Allio (2005) is talking about authentic practice; to learn leadership through 'doing'. Perhaps a good, contemporary example of leaders learning to lead outside of the classroom through physically engaging with others in the construction of leadership behaviors is through adventure retreats. Pollitt (2007) and Watson and Vasilieva (2007) provide examples of leaders engaging in building and restoration work in parks, for example, as ways in which leaders can develop many of the leadership skills and attitudes they will require back in the office.

Measuring Return

A more recent principle to guide leadership development initiatives is that activities must provide the organization with a return on investment (ROI). While measuring ROI is a contentious issue, Archer (2013) provides a wide range of indicators that can be measured in some way and that would reflect whether a leadership initiative has delivered a ROI for the organization. He goes on to say that ROI should be thought about in the planning stage of a leadership development intervention and that it should be part of every such initiative. ROI does not necessarily mean a financial return. Many excellent leadership development experiences can be very expensive - such as retreats with quality international speakers - yet they may never be seen to return value that can be easily written up on a balance sheet. They may, however, generate ROI that indirectly returns a financial windfall through leaders applying newly learned competencies that may be attracting new clients or investors.

Reviewing Outcomes

Post-program review and evaluation is another principle, according to the literature, that is essential for a high quality leadership development initiative. According to, among many others, Bekas (2014), all leadership initiatives should be assessed post-completion for their effectiveness as measured against their espoused pre-program objectives and stated learning outcomes. This necessarily implies an additional principle for leadership initiatives being that they should have explicit objectives and well defined learning outcomes. As with ROI, post-program evaluation serves as a quality assurance mechanism whereby the success and any shortcomings of an initiative can be readily identified and remedied for future initiatives. This equates to a continuous improvement tool for leadership development initiatives. Post-program evaluation, if it involves, as it should, the program's participants, can also serve to generate new ideas to be incorporated into future programs to enhance the enjoyment and learning process for learners. M.S. Rao (Bell, 2012) adds that it is critical that once opinion has been solicited from participants that it is acted upon. Participants must see that their opinions are taken seriously and that they can have an influence over the initiative's evolution.

Qualifying Personnel

In an interview (Bell, 2012) with internationally renowned leadership scholar, author and corporate speaker M.S. Rao, the interviewer asked Rao to share his thoughts about what constitutes quality

leadership development. Rao made a number of points that serve as guiding principles including the observation that only highly qualified, reputable and specialist people should be designing and delivering leadership development initiatives. The same point has been made by Santora *et al.*, (2010). For organizations that outsource their leadership development this means there is onus on the organization to carefully check and validate the credentials of anyone they seek to engage for leadership development. Where leadership development is catered for by employees of an organization, it is important to actively build internal capability to meet leadership development needs. This means hiring, developing and retaining excellent specialists in learning and development. Again; this principle supports a commitment to investing wisely in leadership development and to addressing quality assurance as an important issue.

Involving Senior Leaders

Rao (Bell, 2012) as well as Hurt and Homan (2005) have emphasised the importance of actively involving senior leaders in leadership development initiatives. Passive involvement is much less powerful than having senior leaders make the time to spend with new and developing leaders. Rao suggests it is important that senior figures in the organization share their experiences and stories with developing leaders. Not only is this an excellent way to transfer knowledge, values, attitudes and corporate identity, but it adds gravitas to a program when busy senior executives are actually involved as speakers or facilitators. It sends an important message to the entire organisation that leadership development is a priority for the organisation and that it is taken very seriously.

Aligning and Integrating Leadership Development Activities

Some writers, notably Clayton (2012) have written about the importance of leadership development initiatives being aligned with the organization so that the individual and the organization are simultaneously being developed. Therefore, competencies that are most worth developing in leaders are those which grow the business at the same time. Clayton argues this can be achieved by having leadership development initiatives grounded in organizational development (OD) theory and practice. Formulating initiatives with an OD grounding can have the benefit of maximising ROI by having developing leaders take on tasks and projects as part of their development that might otherwise need to be done by external consultants.

In a similar vein, researchers including Xuejin Qiao (2009); Crethar (2011) and Hurt and Homan (2005) have argued that leadership development should be fully integrated with and aligned to other key business imperatives and projects. Key business imperatives, depending upon the industry might, for example, be safety (mining; oil drilling; commercial aviation); customer service (supermarkets; hotels; call centres) or quality (restaurants; manufacturing; construction). Projects could include product diversification; entering new markets; downsizing or takeovers for example. The important point is 'integration'. Leadership development should not be conducted in isolation from what the organization is striving to achieve or become because leadership is essential to achieving broader organizational plans and goals. Integration facilitates consistency in organizational messages and nurtures a shared understanding by all stakeholders. Integration also provides a leadership development initiative with focus and direction when participants can see the links between development activities and what the organization represents. Corner (2014) and Santora *et al.*, (2010) have said specifically that leadership development ventures should actually be a part of an organization's strategic plan.

Facilitating Flexibility

Another principle advanced by Short (2013) and Clayton (2012) is that contemporary leadership development initiatives must be designed with maximum versatility and flexibility in mind so that program participants can access knowledge and activities on a 'just-in-time' basis. The thinking is that programs planned months in advance and that are rigidly fixed in terms of time, place and process do not reflect the reality of modern organizations nor the work-lives of their leaders. Organizations seldom have the level of predictability that allows for a leadership development activity planned in January and

scheduled for September to proceed as planned. Ultimately, leadership development, irrespective of the rhetoric, will take second place to an urgent business problem that requires leaders' attention.

Partnering with External Providers

Haskins and Shaffer (2009) interviewed a broad cross-section of leaders from various businesses and asked them what, in their opinion, a good leadership development program should look like. The respondents made a number of astute observations, some of which have already been discussed but several which have not. The first principle from this study is that if organizations engage external providers for the leadership initiatives then the organization's leadership development sponsors must maintain active input. This observation from respondents may imply that they have had experiences where the organization engages leadership specialists and then entrusts the entire process to those people with the assumption, perhaps, that experts are flawless. Yet such arrangements between organizations and contractors should be partnerships with both partners equally involved and accountable. Contractors should still take advice and direction and would benefit from guidance on the organization's internal politics and culture. The leadership development initiative would most assuredly benefit from a collaborative approach. Further, as noted several times already, quality assurance is important in leadership development and it is much harder to guarantee quality if the organization engages contractors and then takes a 'hands-off' approach.

Testing Programs Pre-launch

A second finding from the study conducted by Haskins and Shaffer (2009) worthy of being included here as a guiding principle for quality leadership development initiatives is to always pilot (trial) a program before officially launching it. Moreover, ensure pilot participants are carefully selected for a valuable cross-section of relevant interests. These participants should provide post-pilot suggestions for how the program might be enhanced and then these suggestions should be incorporated where prudent into the program before it is officially launched as part of the broader leadership development initiative. Piloting programs can reveal weaknesses or more serious issues that only a trial run would have revealed. Piloting a program with a range of people from across the organization can also be a rich source of constructive criticism that may help avoid later negative criticism from real participants who spot inaccuracies or faults with the program which should have been seen earlier.

Ensuring Open Communications

The third principle of a good leadership development program according to the many leaders surveyed by Haskins and Shaffer (2009) is that all leadership initiatives should have an in-built and comprehensive communications plan. Such a communications plan would ensure that two-way communication between the participants and the facilitators / program managers is encouraged, frequent, open, honest and meaningful. Good communication helps to identify and resolve issues quickly and can remove concerns and doubts so that participants can focus their time on enjoying and benefiting from the development activities. Communication also provides a voice for participants so that they can feel more a part of the journey and not simply vessels for whatever the organization feels they should be filled with.

Implementing New Learning

Auvinen *et al.*, (2013) and Hurt and Homan (2005) have said that it is important that leaders who have attended professional development activities are held accountable for implementing what they have learned in their work. This is especially important to monitor when leaders have been learning away from the workplace. It seems that too often when leaders attend professional development activities these opportunities are viewed simply as an event and learning is not applied back at work. Clearly, leaders who do not apply what they have learned are undermining the purpose of the development activity while ensuring there can be no ROI. It is important that leadership initiatives are unambiguously promoted as attempts to improve practice and the organization. Workshops, seminars and retreats all have the

character of being an event detached from 'real work' and pose a challenge to leadership program sponsors who must help leaders make the link back to the workplace.

One solution is to make it mandatory that every leadership activity a developing leader attends is 'returned to the organization' in some way. It could be through a presentation; a written report; a demonstration; an address; coaching others; contributing to a project and so forth. This could be checked by a senior manager and assessed during annual performance appraisal time. By making leaders accountable for the investment made in their development, it may well increase their level of engagement with development activities and so the ROI that the organization derives from the venture.

Reflecting Global Trends and Issues

In the most recent literature on leadership there is a growing focus on global leadership, intercultural sensitivity, international awareness and leadership as citizenship. Leading university texts on leadership devote a lot of space to these themes (Yukl, 2013; Nahavandi, 2013; Northouse, 2010). These topics are now being mentioned in recent articles on leadership development. Karakas *et al.*, (2013) note that the globalizing world has resulted in business being dominated by multinational companies that transcend cultural, linguistic, religious and social boundaries. This has given rise to the need for a differently skilled kind of leader who is at ease in a diverse range of business contexts. The authors argue that at the core of the new leader should be strong ethical and social principles and that this need has been highlighted by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) a few years ago.

Leadership activities need to reflect the changing expectations of leaders that communities now have. As Karakas *et al.*, (2013) astutely observe; values such as global awareness, social responsibility and sustainability are already mainstays of university executive education programs but have not become anywhere near as ubiquitous in leadership development programs designed by organisations for their own leaders. Therefore there is a real need for organization leadership development activities to incorporate a new set of attitudes, values and beliefs into their offerings to reflect a change in the reality of their operational environment.

The key learning point of this from a development perspective is that leaders need to understand that today their decisions have wide and far-reaching ramifications for people they will never know of. To this end, Sheppard *et al.*, (2013) suggests that quality contemporary leadership development initiatives should also incorporate topics such as climate change; environmental sustainability; cross-cultural leadership; leading remote teams and diversity management. Others have also argued that good quality leadership programs in modern organizations include a strong focus on corporate social responsibility and community engagement so that leaders are oriented to their connectedness with a society which is wider than merely their own organization (McCallum *et al.*, 2013; Sanchez-Hernandez and Gallardo-Vazquez, 2013; Bartsch, 2012).

It is also the case that the GFC has highlighted the need for leaders to be more transparent, accountable, moral and compassionate. Leadership texts call this type of post-GFC leadership 'authentic leadership' (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2010) and it has an important place in contemporary leadership development initiatives. In summary, an important principle for modern leadership development initiatives is the incorporation of the concept of and values associated with 'global leadership'.

Rewarding Desirable Behaviors and Attitudes

The focus of the principles up to this point has largely been on what programs and developing leaders should be doing. Leskiw and Singh (2007) argue that good leadership programs execute a rewards and recognition plan for participating leaders who do well on their learning and demonstrate the desired behaviours, skills and attitudes back in the workplace. This serves the purpose of encouraging participation in activities and then application on the job. Reward and recognition for those who apply what they have learned also sends a strong message to the organization generally that certain behaviours and attitudes are desirable and are what the organization values. Rewards could vary depending on how demanding the program was or how much impact a certain individual's application of learning has had on the organization. Perhaps rewards could include quicker promotions or 'perks' such as a trip to an overseas

conference or a bigger, better equipped office. Smaller rewards that could be given immediately for minor but noticeable contributions might include discount vouchers; movie tickets or a hamper.

Utilizing Technology

Another principle for excellent leadership development initiatives is making a concerted effort to fully embrace modern technology into the design and delivery of development activities. Technology should not *become* the learning or become the focal point of any activity; the technology must serve the learning objectives. Technology should be utilized to enhance the learner's acquisition of skills and knowledge by making learning more realistic, enjoyable and accessible.

Mustafa (2013) cites examples of e-learning applications like podcasts and virtual classrooms which can enhance learning and reduce costs without compromising quality or learning outcomes. Mustafa also argues that computer-based technologies provide twenty-four hour access to development activities anywhere in the world which reflects the needs of many modern business executives. Mustafa continues that e-learning applications allow for greater flexibility in delivery such as simulating dangerous work environments for learners without exposing them to real risk while learning. Computers also help program managers manage and track participants and their progress more efficiently than traditional learning management methods. Other applications such as wikis; blogs; file sharing software; VOIP programs like Skype can all enhance leadership development programs and reduce costs such as travel; photocopying; phone calls and training venues.

Financing Programs Adequately

The final 'principle of excellence' concerns financial resourcing. Santora *et al.*, (2010) have said that leadership initiatives need to be well funded and that organizations must set aside dedicated funds for leadership development. In other words; leadership development should be planned for when budgets are being developed and that a distinct budget of protected funds should be set aside expressly for leadership development. Santora's and his colleagues' observation tends to imply that in some organisations leadership development is an afterthought or something that the organization hopes to be able to do subject to funds being available after other projects have been paid for. This would often result in leadership activities being under-funded or leadership planners being expected to achieve too much with too little. Corner (2014) has argued that coaching, for example, is a proven cost-effective way to develop leaders. He argues that coaching costs are easily controlled and able to be forecasted so that coaching activities are managed in ways that return good value for the investment.

Poor planning communicates several unhelpful messages to the organization at large. Firstly; leadership development is not a priority or something the organization especially values. Secondly; planning for the organization's future is not a priority or something the organization especially values. The third message this approach communicates is that the organization is willing to compromise on the quality and capacity of leaders. This in turn is troubling to the regular non-leadership workforce who would hope to have leaders that are effective and well disposed to leading them.

Represented in Table 1 is a summary of important principles for leadership development activities as identified through the literature review for this study. It is not intended or proffered as a definitive list and the principles are not listed in any particular order. The principles documented in Table 1 became the focus of the questions for the mailed questionnaire.

TABLE 1
PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Leadership Development Principle	Source
Conduct a thorough review of the business to identify current leadership competencies and the gaps.	<i>Addison & Cunningham (2006)</i>
Leadership cannot be taught; programs must be based around practice and practicing; not theory.	<i>Dinkin and Frederick (2013); Hageman (2013); Pollitt, 2007; Watson and Vasilieva, (2007); Allio (2005)</i>
Initiatives should provide a return on investment and this must be measured.	<i>Archer (2013)</i>
Leadership initiatives should: - Utilise quality, qualified specialists - Actively involve senior leaders - Solicit, listen to and act on participant feedback	<i>Romanowska et al., (2013); Bell (2012)</i>
Initiatives must be flexible and versatile to meet 'just-in-time' needs of leaders	<i>Short, 2013; Clayton (2012)</i>
Leadership initiatives should be fully integrated with and aligned to other key business strategies	<i>Xuejin Qiao, (2009); Crethar (2011); Hurt & Homan (2005)</i>
Identify the specific development needs of leaders on an individual basis; they are likely to differ	<i>Davis & Callahan (2012) Bowles et al., (2007); Rhodes and Fletcher (2013)</i>
- When using external providers; the internal specialists must be actively involved throughout the process - Always pilot any initiative before launching it - All initiatives must have an inbuilt communications plan	<i>Haskins & Shaffer (2009)</i>
Participants must be able to practice what they are learning	<i>Auvinen et al, (2013); Hurt & Homan (2005)</i>
Initiatives must reward those who do well and demonstrate the desired outcomes	<i>Leskin (2007)</i>
Initiatives must embrace available modern technologies for the learning advantages they offer and cost reductions they can deliver	<i>Mustafa (2013)</i>
Initiatives must incorporate strong ethical and social principles and values of global awareness, CSR, citizenship and sustainability	<i>Karakas et al, (2013); Sheppard et al, (2013); McCallum et al., 2013; Sanchez-Hernandez and Gallardo-Vazquez, 2013; Bartsch, 2012</i>
- Allocate sufficient funds to do development well - Incorporate leadership development as part of the organisation's strategic plan	<i>Santora et al, (2010); Corner (2014)</i>

RESEARCH APPROACH

A questionnaire was developed based upon the leadership development best practice principles discovered during the literature review. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to identify the frequency with which respondents complied with the principles. There were no open-ended or qualitative questions on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed to 'The Manager: Leadership Development/ Learning and Development Manager' at 379 private companies across Australia. Companies were sourced using several free, publicly accessible internet databases. The intended respondents were given one month in which to complete and return the questionnaire. The questionnaire was accompanied by a pre-paid, self-addressed envelope with the aim of boosting the response rate. 113 useable questionnaires were returned by the due date. 113 useable questionnaires were returned by

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 2
RESPONSE RATE BY LOCATION

(n=113)

City	Responses (#)	Responses (%)	Male	Female
Sydney	37	32.8	12	25
Melbourne	18	15.9	8	10
Brisbane	16	14.1	8	8
Perth	14	12.4	5	9
Adelaide	11	9.8	7	3
Newcastle	9	7.9	5	4
Hobart	5	4.4	1	4
Canberra	3	2.7	2	1

The majority of respondents came from the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area as shown in Table 2. Sydney is Australia's largest city and the country's primary commercial and business hub. Arguably the high levels of best practice compliance found in the data reflect the large response from Australia's most developed and international corporate sector. One third of all respondents to the survey were from Sydney. There were 48 male and 65 female respondents. The study did not seek any further demographic information such as age of respondents or industry sector. The objective was to encourage a high response rate by keeping the questionnaire as short as possible and focusing on the principles of best practice questions.

The research findings are summarized in Table 3. The first observation from the collated data is that in response to each principle, a majority of respondents indicated that they always adhere to this principle. The number of respondents indicating they always adhered ranged from a low of 50.4 per cent (CSR, citizenship and sustainability) through to a high of 79.6 per cent (leadership development is part of the strategic plan). The number of respondents indicating zero compliance with the principles was always very low with three exceptions: 14.1 per cent (CSR, citizenship and sustainability); 11.5 per cent (utilizing modern technologies) and 10.6 per cent (involving senior leaders in design and delivery). In nearly all cases respondent rates for 'usually' were higher than rates for 'rarely' and therefore overall compliance with all leadership best practice principles was high.

It is noticeable that there appears to be a significant degree of discretionary practice regarding the application of principles of best practice. This is suggested by the sizeable minority of respondents indicating 'sometimes' as a response. The inference is that sometimes a particular principle is being adhered to but on other occasions not. The reasons for this are not identified in this study. It is possible that time, cost, practicalities or nature of the leadership development initiative (for example: coaching; volunteering; classroom based learning) influence whether principles are being adopted. By way of example, 22.1 per cent of respondents said that they 'sometimes' pilot an initiative prior to full launch. Whether initiatives are designed to be flexible in order to meet just-in-time needs, 15 per cent of all respondents answered 'sometimes'.

TABLE 3
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

(n=113)

Leadership Development Principle	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Conduct a thorough review of the business to identify current leadership competencies and the gaps.	85	10	10	5	3
Leadership programs must be based around practice and practicing; not theory.	77	19	15	0	2
Initiatives should be measured to identify their ROI	70	12	13	11	7
Leadership initiatives should utilise quality, qualified specialists	84	11	10	8	0
Leadership initiatives should solicit, listen to and act on participant feedback	81	20	8	5	0
Leadership initiatives should actively involve senior leaders in design and delivery	66	15	10	10	12
Initiatives must be flexible and versatile to meet 'just-in-time' needs of leaders	73	10	17	12	1
Leadership initiatives should be fully integrated with and aligned to other key business strategies	88	11	4	7	3
Identify the specific development needs of leaders on an individual basis; they are likely to differ	68	22	9	4	10
When using external providers; the internal specialists must be actively involved throughout the process	89	16	2	6	0
All initiatives must have an inbuilt communications plan	71	9	10	14	9
Always pilot any initiative before launching it	63	11	25	6	8
Participants must be able to practice what they are learning	82	12	9	10	0
Initiatives must reward those who do well and demonstrate the desired outcomes	75	16	11	8	2
Initiatives must embrace available modern technologies for the learning advantages they offer and cost reductions they can deliver	62	18	16	4	13
Initiatives must incorporate strong ethical and social principles and values of global awareness, CSR, citizenship and sustainability	57	20	8	11	16
Allocate sufficient funds to do development well	66	15	15	12	5
Incorporate leadership development as part of the organisation's strategic plan	90	13	6	2	2

In response to whether leadership initiatives are based around practice rather than theory, 13.2 per cent of respondents said 'sometimes'. Further research would be required to learn more about whether there is a discernible pattern or commonly experienced underlying reasons why respondents selected the 'sometimes' option.

CONCLUSION

This research project consisted of a comprehensive literature review of scholarly articles on the topic of leadership development. An analysis of principles of best practice in leadership development initiatives led to the design of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed to Australian leadership and learning and development managers in private companies. The 113 useable responses provided an insight into the

frequency with which those designing, delivering and managing leadership development initiatives adhere to best practice principles.

The data revealed that to a very significant extent the survey respondents indicated a high level of compliance with all principles of best practice in leadership development with most respondents rating their organization as 'always' or 'usually' compliant. Around 80 per cent of responses, on average, for each principle were found to be always or usually compliant. Having noted this, there were principles where the percentage of 'always' responses was below 60 per cent. There were also a number of principles where the percentage of 'rarely' combined with 'never' responses were relatively high with a peak of 23.8 per cent for one particular response.

It is the conclusion of this research study that while Australian companies, based upon data from the surveyed sample, are significantly compliant with best practice principles in leadership development that there is opportunity for improvement. It is recommended that all leadership development initiatives actually be guided by clear, written principles against which quality can be measured. Leadership development specialists must secure organizational commitment (and sufficient funding) for a charter of best practice principles to be implemented to guide leadership development initiatives. As well as maintaining quality and integrity, a charter would also provide a framework to follow to maximize the return on the organization's investment in leadership development.

The author acknowledges that there are some limitations to the usability and transferability of the research findings. The sample size was relatively small; certainly as a proportion of Australia's privately owned companies. It is also true that one-third of all respondents were from just one city and it is possible that companies in smaller, regional areas might have returned different data. It is also a reasonable assumption that this survey would have returned quite different data if circulated in other countries and as such the transferability of the data is limited. The survey instrument did not include any open-ended questions and as such context is missing from this data with which to better understand the responses. The survey also sought little demographic data so as to keep the response rate high and errors to a minimum. Greater demographic data would have enriched the findings and allowed the researcher to make further observations.

This study provides a platform for further research to better understand the issues raised here and to add to areas this survey did not address. For example; this survey did not seek the participation of the public and not-for-profit sectors and this could be an interesting area for further research into leadership development best practice principles. Perhaps an international comparative study would also help put this study's findings into a broader context. Finally, it could be valuable to conduct some in-depth interviews or convene focus groups on some of the issues raised here to better understand why respondents answered the way that they did.

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