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Leadership and learning: facilitating self-directed learning in enterprises

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Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to show that a key aspect of learning and development of individual employees is that of self-directedness. This paper will consider the role of the leader in facilitating workforce development in terms of employees' self-directedness for learning. The research was designed to investigate the views that “learning leaders” in organizations have towards the development of self-directedness in employees; and to identify strategies that are feasible in developing self-directedness in operating organizations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws on a national research project undertaken in 12 organizations in Australia, representing a range of sizes and a number of industry sectors. Data collection involved interviewing learning and development managers in each organization to gauge the relative feasibility of the implementation of a number of pre-identified strategies designed to develop self-directedness among employees within operating work environments.

**Findings** – The research showed that: learning managers and leaders were generally well disposed towards the development of self-directedness, and some had already moved to do so; and identified a number of possible strategies for implementation of varying degrees of feasibility. The paper will consider these findings in relation to the concept of a “learning leader”.

**Research limitations/implications** – Although the research was conducted in a diverse set of 12 enterprises, applicability of the results across an even wider set of enterprises would need to be tested.

**Originality/value** – The findings of this research provide guidance to learning and
development personnel on feasible strategies to use within their own organization to assist with the development of self-directed learning among employees.

Article Type:
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Keyword(s):
Self managed learning; Leaders; Self development; Workplace learning; Australia.

Introduction

The recognition that self-directedness in learning among employees has an important part to play in the competitiveness of enterprises has been developed by several writers during the 1990s (Edwards, 1995; Calder and McCollum, 1998; Morris-Basket and Dixon, 1992; Robinson and Arthy, 1999). For those writers, self-directedness among workers is an objective worthy of pursuit by organisations wishing to achieve knowledge and skill development for a competitive edge in a rapidly changing industrial context. Smith commented that:

...there is considerable commercial value in encouraging employees to become effective self-directed learners such that they can develop and pursue their learning goals and outcomes that contribute to competitiveness without the need for all learning to occur only when there is direct training by an instructor (Smith, 2002, p. 111).

However, the evidence that the development of self-directed learning (SDL) is not well supported in the workplace appears disappointingly compelling. Although the literature is rich in discussion of SDL, for the purposes of this paper we have adopted the conceptualisation put forward by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991). In developing their Personal Responsibility Orientation model, Brockett and Hiemstra identified two dimensions of SDL. The first of these represents the external instructional processes in which an individual learner assumes responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating the learning process. The second dimension focuses on the internal desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning.

The research reported in this paper was the second part of a larger project focussing on flexible learning and SDL in workplaces (see Smith, 2001). Working with apprentices in several industry sectors, Smith showed that there was a preference for learning that was well structured, and instructor-led, and little preference for SDL. Additionally, the apprentices in Smith’s sample were also less enthusiastic about text-based and verbally presented learning than they were about hands-on experience and practice. These findings were hardly surprising in relation to apprentices, but they provided a challenge to workplace learning methods that rely on SDL developed and delivered through text or otherwise verbally presented learning material. The suggestion that Smith made in that research was not only that the findings in relation to apprentices needed to be accepted, but that
approaches to workplace learning delivered through flexible means which necessitate a degree of SDL are here to stay. Accordingly, Smith (2001) developed a set of strategies that could be used in operating workplaces to develop SDL among learners, and to provide support for those learners.

Also focusing on apprentices, earlier work by Brooker and Butler (1997) has shown that there is room to doubt the effectiveness of support for apprentice learners in the workplace. Through interviewing apprentices and their trainers in Australian workplaces, Brooker and Butler (1997) have shown that:

- apprentices rated highly those pathways to learning that involved structured learning and assistance from another more expert worker, where such a person was accessible to them;
- feedback on their work from more expert workers was valued highly; and
- learning or practising alone were not favoured pathways for learning.

However, their research indicated that being left to learn on their own was a common experience for apprentices, and that workplaces seldom had put into place the policies, practices or personnel to support learning on the job. While practices prevalent in workplaces assumed (or at least required) a considerable degree of self-directed learning (SDL) among learners, there were seldom any processes to support learning outside structured and more formal learning activities. Smith’s (2001) research indicated that the problem here was not so much an unwillingness to move towards a learner-centred paradigm that provides effective support to learners, but that it was more a problem of not knowing how to do it. Similarly, Berge (2001) has pointed out that moving learning within an organisation away from the more traditional management-determined and instructor-led contexts into a more learner-centred form may sometimes challenge the existing skills, role perception and confidence of human resource development (HRD) specialists and managers more generally (Sadler-Smith, 2006). This is likely to require the realisation of employees’ potential via employee development in a supportive environment (Holton and Naquin, 2000), through leaders acting both as “catalysts and servants” (Bolman and Deal, 2003), and through the leaders encompassing the activities of educating, caching and facilitating in their roles (Dyer, 1995).

The rapid accessing and acquisition of new knowledge, the recognition of its relevance and the willingness to share it for the benefit of other individuals and the organisation are amongst the characteristics of knowledge workers, and also among the characteristics of self-directed learners (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991). Breaking out of the confines of the individually-focused acquisition and storage of knowledge which often typifies an individualised conception of learning is sometimes a considerable challenge for some learners and human resource development (HRD) practitioners, and also for organizations which may need to unlock and effectively use knowledge assets in a shared way. For organizations this means the development of a culture that rewards the surfacing, sharing and codifying of knowledge and an emphasis on building capacity of knowledge workers, other individuals, and the organisation. As Jurie (2000, p. 265) puts it, “Organisations which
hamper or stunt the free development of their members or constituents...limit their own effectiveness”.

This paper will consider the role of the leader in facilitating workforce development in terms of employees' self-directedness for learning. A number of researchers have suggested the notion of the “learning leader” as a useful framework around which to conceptualise some of these issues (e.g. Sadler, 2001; Sadler-Smith, 2006).

An important issue here is how management views and values HRD. The extent to which managers, and especially senior managers and directors, “buy into” the significance of learning and development is a key determinant of the strategic impact of HRD. Whilst many writers, for example Bartlett and Ghosal (1993), have argued that learning and HRD are crucial contributors to enterprise performance and growth, well-being, and overall competitiveness, as Smith and Sadler-Smith (2006) have observed, there are enterprises where learning and HRD are seen only as cost, rather than as investment. Within an investment conceptualisation of HRD resources are dedicated to the development of human, intellectual and social capital and are seen as part of a strategic approach to organisational capacity building. It indicates an alliance between business strategy and HRD strategy that many writers (for example, Boxall, 1996) have argued is essential to effective HRD. At the same time, though, there may still exist the conceptualisation in the minds of some managers of it as a cost only – a burden that has to be borne in order to provide people with the skills necessary to carry out their work.

In a previous investigation of the same organizations involved in the current study, there is also evidence (Smith et al., 2002) that it is not uncommon for organisations to take an investment view of HRD among its professional and managerial staff, but a cost burden view when it comes to their operator and lower level staff. This attitude may be related to the human resource management strategy consciously put in place by an organization, consistent with the HRD strategies of utilisation, innovation and accumulation. However, the same diversity can come from some much less strategic positions such as a belief that some groups of employees are in less need of HRD, or less capable of providing a return from it, a habit because “that's the way things are done around here”, or a failure to understand the significance of knowledge and skill development for a range of jobs beyond those that are technical, managerial or professional (Sadler-Smith, 2006; Smith and Sadler-Smith, 2006). The suggestion was made by Snell and Dean (1992) that HRD needs to recognise the knowledge component of a much broader range of occupations as part of its planning processes. It has been argued by Smith and Sadler-Smith (2006) that this more complex HRD planning in highly diversified environments is not the maintenance of a sophisticated machine, but a much more complex and ever-moving mosaic of interdependent and unpredictable events.

In the present paper we draw on research conducted across twelve enterprises in Australia. The data were analysed to explore the views that learning leaders in organizations have towards the development of self-directedness in employees; and to identify strategies that are feasible in developing self-directedness in operating organizations.
Research method

Interviews were conducted with the learning and development (L&D) manager of each enterprise, or with the management person with responsibility for L&D in the enterprise. The interviews were designed to identify the strategies used by, or supported by, L&D managers in the development of SDL. Each of the people interviewed played a major role in leading learning in the enterprise. The interview schedules were based around the range of strategies identified at a theoretical level by Smith (2001). The design of the interview schedule, and the discussion that took place with each enterprise, were intended to elicit response to as many of these strategies as was possible, and to identify new ones. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed to text. Each text was then content analysed to provide a response to each strategy from the interviewee, and then those responses were collated for each strategy proposed by Smith, and for each new strategy identified by interviewees. Following the transcription of interviews to text, interviewees were provided with the text and asked to verify accuracy. Semi-structured interview formats were adopted since, as Robson (2002) has argued, these interviews enable planned and consistent approach to the data collection, but space to deviate from the plan to follow up leads that may become evident during the process of the interview.

Interview questions that framed and guided the semi-structured interviews are shown below:

1. Which of the following strategies do you use to prepare learners for self-directed learning?
   - Encouraging workers to work with trainers to identify learning goals that specify the knowledge, skills and concepts to be learned?
   - Encouraging workers to work with trainers to develop and negotiate learning plans/comprehensive learning contracts (including tasks, learning resources, liaison with other workers)?
   - Having regular discussions with workers to monitor their learning progress and to modify plans/learning contracts?
   - What other strategies do you employ?

2. How can a range of learning experiences be provided for trainees?
   - By providing opportunities for workers to withdraw from work activities to make use of learning resources?
   - By exposing them to a range of experiences? A range of problem-solving situations?
   - Through encouragement/facilitation of a range of learning strategies/resources that are verbally or textually presented?
   - Through assistance with the acquisition of skills in structured observation and questioning?
   - Do you have any other suggestions?

3. What sorts of strategies might help to place learning into a work context?
   - Provision of increasing responsibility, work complexity and participation as learning progresses?
4. What policies does your organisation have in place to support training? Do any policies recognise:
   - The value placed on training and on learners?
   - How assessment is to be carried out and what the rewards for training might be?
   - The importance placed on a diversity of experience?
   - Both skills development and underpinning knowledge?

5. Can you describe the development of any training structures that:
   - Identify training personnel and their roles?
   - Provide for training plan development for both the enterprise and individual workers?
   - Enable access to people, learning resources and experiences as needed?
   - Enable partnership arrangements with external training providers, and management of those relationships?
   - Indicate support availability for learners in accessing learning experiences? Learning materials?

6. Does your organisation have mechanisms for the development of trainers to become effective in?
   - Helping workers to learn?
   - Ensuring that workers develop the skills/understanding necessary to achieve learning goals/contracts?
   - Development of a supportive learning environment where there is encouragement of questioning and provision of experts who are willing to assist in learning?

The data collection was based in 12 different enterprises. Both Billett (2001) and MacDonald (1999) point to important differences in HRD and training that occur between enterprises with different characteristics. To provide a diversity of enterprise contexts these were selected to collectively provide a range of size, industry sector, structure, range of activity, and location in terms of regional or metropolitan. Although Evans (2001) noted it, typically regional or metropolitan location of an enterprise as a variable has not been widely noted in the literature, in a large and low-density population country such as Australia distance from metropolitan centres can have a significant influence on access to HRD and training opportunities. Additionally, since the research required enterprises to have had known interest in SDL in the workplace, and to have given thought to it, each enterprise had some experience with it as a workplace L&D strategy. Knowledge of enterprises that had an interest in SDL was derived through the professional networks of the researchers.

In summary, the bases for selection of this group of enterprises were several:

- there is both regional and metropolitan representation;
- a range of size is represented;
- a range of industry sectors and enterprise core business is represented;
• enterprises with very focussed activities are represented, along with enterprises that have a wide range of services or products;
• a range of business structures is represented;
• enterprises with distributed workforces are represented, together with enterprises that operate only on one site; and
• all enterprises had a commitment to L&D, as known by the researchers, and had used a range of L&D techniques that require SDL.

The 12 selected enterprises are described below.

**Manufacturing industry sector**

1. A large manufacturer (420 employees) of metals products, regionally located.
2. A medium-sized (85 employees) chemical manufacturer regionally located as the Australian subsidiary of a multi-national company.
3. A medium-sized wool scouring plant (140 employees) regionally located.
4. A large electrical goods manufacturer, metropolitan based with sites throughout Australia, and 540 employees.
5. A medium-sized, regionally-based, garment design and distribution enterprise (180 employees).
6. A major, general purpose, metropolitan hospital (1,950 employees).
7. A major employment service, metropolitan based, but providing service through a large number of geographically distributed client centres (1,200 employees).
8. A specialised health service component of a local government authority (150 employees).
9. A large retail chain operating a large number of stores throughout regional and metropolitan Australia.
10. A specialised food retailer operating small franchised outlets throughout Australia.
11. A small restaurant, regionally based, with around 20 employees.
12. An organisation providing support to the vehicle sales and service industry.

**Results and discussion**

It was clear that strategies used or supported by enterprises could be classified into those aimed at the development of SDL among individual learners or groups of learners; and those aimed at the development of the workplace as a supportive environment and culture for the development of SDL.

**Developing SDL among learners**

With respect to strategies aimed at developing self-directed learners, strategies considered feasible related to locating the learning within existing learner knowledge, and the contextualisation of that learning in the broader enterprise. Additionally, learning leaders considered it feasible to ensure that learners had access to other expert workers who could provide learning experiences through demonstration, discussion and guided practice.
As one respondent put it:

The learner is provided with information detailing what development module and outcome the training will address. This information explains the uses of the training. This will start the “portfolio of evidence” that they will build during their training. The learner is then monitored by a training officer every 3 weeks and encouraged to discuss and try other ways of going about the learning.

Learning leaders were much more qualified in their views on the feasibility of those strategies which actually develop the learning strategies of learners in the workplace. Largely, views of the feasibility of learner involvement in the setting of learning directions were associated with a feeling that there is simply not time to do this, coupled with the view that many workplace supervisors were simply not well-equipped with the knowledge to do it. There was, however, a view that the development of learning goals and contracts was feasible at higher levels in enterprises, typically among professional and managerial staff. Also more likely to be considered feasible at these higher levels were regular discussions on progress towards expected learning outcomes, the development of a structured pathway to achieve the outcomes, and adjustment to expected learning on the basis of experience as it progressed. A typical response was:

Yes, we do that, though only on request and only for more senior staff. A range of presenters may introduce the material before a development plan may be constructed to assess needed areas of development. That plan may involve learning in the company or from outside providers. The important thing is that people are developing their own plans.

These features of learning management were generally considered feasible, and even desirable, within a performance review process, where new learning became a part of the expectations on an employee over a period of time. There was also a view that it was feasible to withdraw higher level workers from the production process, and in some enterprises, even expected. At lower levels of personnel within the enterprise this form of withdrawal was largely seen as feasible where it formed part of an enterprise agreement relating to terms and conditions of employment. In these respects, the observations of Whittaker (1995) and Evans (2001), that there is a clear tension between the learning needs of enterprises and their production imperatives, are largely borne out in the current research.

All enterprises in the sample saw as feasible, and desirable, the various strategies associated with the provision of opportunities for engagement in demonstrations and practice, provision of a diversity of relevant experience, facilitation of scaffolding and its gradual withdrawal as skills developed, and the integration of on- and off-the-job learning. Making available these experiences in a variety of ways to support individual differences in learning styles through a variety of learning materials and experiences was generally accepted as feasible, although there was clear evidence that these activities needed to be undertaken within the enterprise production schedule (Calder and McCollum, 1998; Smith, 2000).
The strategies identified for the development of skills in a community of practice were considered feasible by all where they involved interaction between learners and other workers, HRD personnel and supervisors. Those are the usual forms of worker interaction in any workplace and require no particular effort on the part of enterprises. However, beyond that, learning leaders saw as highly feasible the encouragement of those relationships in a learning context to enable the development of required skills and knowledge:

These are irreplaceable for networking, interaction, support, the exchanging of ideas and skills sharing. We’re talking adult learners though and I wouldn’t necessarily think a lot of apprentices would do that. The adults, as business operators have the need and passion to do this, and we arrange and contrive that it happens.

Although research reviewed by Sadler-Smith (2006) and Smith and Sadler-Smith (2006) suggested that the involvement of workers in communities of practice was largely unstructured and unplanned, it appears that among the enterprises in our sample there is an acceptance that strategies can be put in place to achieve this in a more systematic way.

Apart from senior and professional staff, the development by learners of their own learning objectives, and the pursuit of those objectives through organised discussion and articulation only achieved a qualified view of feasibility. Largely, the qualification involved a view that these forms of “time out” (Calder and McCollum, 1998) discussions were feasible only in a context of a discussion about production tasks, rather than in a context of discussions about knowledge acquisition. Generally considered infeasible for the same lower level employees was the provision of assistance in developing the skills of structured observation and question asking – an important component of the enquiry associated with SDL. These skills are important for learners to develop but learners were generally expected to either already have them, or to develop them for themselves. The notion that these skills are already in place is at odds with research by Smith (2000) and Warner et al. (1998), where the evidence was that these skills were not typically well developed in workplace learners.

**Developing workplaces to support SDL**

Strategies that were seen by all to be feasible were those associated with the development and articulation of training policies that indicated the value placed on L&D by the enterprise; the forms of L&D that could be expected; details of assessment policies; a recognition of dialogue between learners and HRD personnel on learning goals and their achievement; an expectation that learning would make use of the community of practice available in the enterprise; and a statement that individual L&D plans, activities and achievements would be recorded. There was a qualified view of the feasibility of providing statements of the sorts of knowledge to be pursued (e.g. skills and/or conceptual) and time availability within the production schedule for non-formal or flexible learning. Whether or not learning leaders considered as feasible the details of HRD structures was strongly related to size and formality, with some larger enterprises seeing the provision of considerable detail as feasible and desirable, and small enterprises tending to have a more informal set of arrangements (MacDonald, 1999).
The strategies identified for the development of HRD structures were largely seen as feasible. Whilst more specific strategies for the role development of HRD personnel were also seen as feasible by all, different interpretations need to be placed on that finding. First, in larger enterprises with an identifiable HR/HRD structure or function and personnel accountable for the management of L&D, there was acceptance that the development of skills needed for L&D plan development, implementation, assessment, learning resource and personnel access, and implementation of HRD policy were feasible. There was also a view that the development of HRD roles to include championing of learners to management staff and other workers was feasible and desirable, in a spirit of ensuring a value was placed on L&D and on learners. Likewise, the identification of external L&D possibilities and partnerships were also seen as feasible strategies. Consistent, though, with the discussion of the preparation of learners, only limited feasibility was identified among those strategies that provide for the development among HRD personnel of the skills required to assist learners to become more self-directed.

Finally, the development of effective HRD personnel was generally regarded as feasible and desirable. However, there was not a strong view that it was necessary or feasible to provide people who were adept at developing workers' ability to learn (their “learning-to-learn” skills) or who facilitated the development of self-directed learners. That finding is at odds with other work suggesting that the skills of learning, and knowing how to learn are important for effective workplace learning (Smith and Sadler-Smith, 2006), particularly as it is provided through situated and flexible learning paradigms.

Summary

In summary, factors that were shown to be related to the feasibility of strategies designed to develop SDL among individuals in enterprises related to the availability of time, perceived skills of supervisors, and the forms of learning network acknowledged as present and encouraged. Variations also related to size, geographic distribution, and the level of formality in the enterprise structure, procedures, and expected training outcomes. Beyond these enterprise characteristics such as size and geographic distribution, there are three issues that appear to influence perceptions of the feasibility of implementing various strategies to improve SDL in the workplace:

1. First, the enterprise and learning leader's notion of the place of L&D as a vehicle for organisational development. Enterprises viewing L&D as an essential element of organisational development generally perceived more SDL strategies as feasible than did enterprises that saw L&D as more peripheral.
2. Second, where L&D formed part of an enterprise agreement relating to terms and conditions of employment, more strategies appeared to be seen as feasible.
3. Third, hazardous work and safety issues had some impact on how feasible some strategies were viewed. Where the work of the enterprise involved hazardous processes there was evidence of a preference for strategies that closely prescribed worker learning outcomes (as competencies), learning activities, assessment processes and standards. SDL was not favoured for those learning outcomes.
What this research tells us about learning leaders is important to the development of SDL among employees, or among the “followers”. The learning leader role is crucial in a number of ways:

- developing in the broader management and culture of the enterprise a view that L&D is an important part of enterprise health and competitiveness;
- similarly, a broad development across the enterprise of the view that SDL is an important strategy in effective L&D;
- development among HRD personnel, supervisors and workplace experts the skills needed to value, encourage and support SDL among workers at all levels;
- development of the structures, policies, practices and motivators underpinning the encouragement and development of SDL at all levels of employee; and
- recognition that SDL needs to be practised differently across the enterprise, and engaged in to different degrees among the different sorts of workers in the enterprise.

References


**Further Reading**


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