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A Descriptive Exploration of Executive Perceptions of Leadership

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Resource Management at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

Interest in leadership from academics and practitioners has been steadily increasing both nationally and internationally. Despite this interest many questions remain regarding the importance, nature, and development of leaders. There has also been a growing concern regarding the quantity and quality of leadership available within organisations.

This research addresses the under-researched area of executives' perceptions on these issues. Executives' perceptions are seen to be important as they determine: the quality of leadership they personally provide; the resources and executive attention devoted to leadership issues within organisations; and the strategies required to further develop executives as leaders.

770 Australasian executives were surveyed in order to elicit their perspective on the three critical areas of:

1. The importance of leadership to their organisations
2. What is leadership?
3. How to develop leaders (principles and processes)?

The overwhelming majority of surveyed executives believe that leadership is important to the future success of their organisations. Leaders were characterised as those who provide direction, are people focused, and character based. Further, the majority (92.5%) of executives believe that leaders are different from managers.

Executives believe that, while leaders can be developed, aspects of leadership are born or innate. Leadership development should be inside-out, starting with one's values, motives, and assumptions; requires a focus on learning and teaching; should integrate action and reflection; and takes longer than a week to develop.
Overall, the ability to attract, recruit, develop, retain and sustain leaders is seen to be poor to fair and the time and effort spent ensuring the necessary leadership is inadequate. Collectively executives believe that an effective leadership system requires both a strong willingness (culture) and strong competence (ability). The organisation must value leadership and be willing to support, encourage and invest in the different leadership processes, as well as complementing this attitude with effective practices.

This research provides valuable insights into executives' perceptions of leadership and leadership development and into the practical implications of these for organisations. It also raises questions for future research that may further enhance the quantity and quality of leadership and therefore increase the quality of working life for people within organisations.
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