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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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1997**

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The comment that “I have to do this myself, but I cannot do it alone” expresses well the reality of a Ph.D. The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the following people for their assistance in creating this research.

To my supervisors, Philip Dewe and Phil Ramsey who, in spite of their own busy lives have generously given their time and insights. They have gone far beyond the commitment required of their role and have edited, advised, restructured, shaped and encouraged this research. I am very grateful for their guidance. A special thanks to Phil Ramsey who inspired me many years before this Ph.D, saving me from the dismal science of economics and fostering a desire for human resource and organisational development issues.

To Mike and Lyn Bebb for their help and support. Lyn for her editing and encouragement, and my mentor Mike, who has stimulated and deepened my understanding of leadership in particular, but in a multitude of areas too numerous to mention. I value both of their contributions to my life and to this research.

I would like to thank the 770 executives who completed this questionnaire and made this research possible. A special thanks to Jane Bainbridge (AIM), Geoffrey Bowes (NZIOD), David Chapman (NZIM), Karin Duncan (NZATD), Bernard Kelly (AMINO), Ms Manning (BPW), Micheal Pate (IPMNZ), Mr Soutter (Business Council of Australia), and Ross Wilson (SES) who provided the opportunity to approach these executives.

To Jeff Blyde, Julie McDougall, Ruth Payne, Chris Wotton, who contributed to the trial of the questionnaire and made recommendations for its improvement, and to Evan Andrews for facilitating the collection of the Australian component of the research.

To my close friends Chris and Naomi Collins and Peter Lineham who have taken an active interest in my work, encouraged me to finish, and ensured that there was more to life than leadership.

To my wife, Michele who has 'run interference' for me on all fronts, allowing me the space to concentrate on this research. She has lovingly endured her absentee husband in the first two years of marriage, and has done much more than her share of editing, proof reading, and questionnaire folding. But most importantly, I appreciate her love and support which have carried me throughout all aspects of my life for the last six years.

And above all, thanks to God who is the provider of all good things, and who has faithfully provided for me, in many more ways than I will ever know.

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