Review of the Strategic Leadership Acumen Program as an Approach to Leader Development

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Executive Summary

People development is often promoted by organisations as a key commitment or focus for future organisational success. There are various proposed approaches to developing future leaders, including skills based training, coaching, intensive feedback approaches and on the job learning. This review considers one particular program used as a means of expanding participants’ worldviews, relationships and experiences. The Strategic Leadership Acumen (SLA) program brings together a group of individuals to undertake an experience that facilitates learning for the individual and group whilst addressing a topic of potential benefit to the organisation. Focusing on the experiences of one particular SLA group, which included the author, this review will seek to illustrate how such a program successfully operates and the impact it has on the learning experiences of participants, as well as any potential improvements that could be made.

The first step is the clarification of leadership in terms of what is being developed. It is acknowledged that there are many perspectives that consider the leader as the identifier, creator, driver and controller of organisational outcomes, built largely on the premise of leaders being able to identify and control changes required to achieve their planned outcomes. Many of these perspectives define leadership in the context of a leader and in terms of the traditional hierarchical approach to organisations. An alternate perspective to leadership has developed from the application of complexity theory to the social science of leadership and aligns to the concept of organisations as complex adaptive systems. This idea of emergent leadership, existing as a social act of relational dialogue within complex adaptive systems, presents interesting challenges to the historic approaches of leader development.

The core of this review is concerned with the concept of Leader development, in the sense of the individual developing capability in preparation to undertake varied roles and respond to future challenges. However whilst the concept of leader development usually has a focus on individual development, a well balanced development of leaders within an organisation should not exclude the recognition that such development can involve groups of developing leaders so that key relational capabilities are developed as well as the development of networks arising from such interactions, referring more towards Leadership development. It is therefore proposed that a quality approach could allow for this through creating situational learning for individuals to interact with others in order to investigate how they bring together their diverse worldviews to develop new means in approaching unique challenges, whilst developing the networks and relational capabilities key to modern leadership. The potential to add elements of skill based knowledge and opportunities for individual reflection would make for a very effective modern development intervention able to be provided for a range of organisational members.
To assist in reflecting upon the SLA program against this target outcome, and establish how things may have been different, a framework is developed to consider the three elements which come together to achieve the overall program outcomes. These are the team project (team actions and participant interactions), the individual (actions and perceptions) and the program learning approach. Each element is able to be modelled independently as a subsystem upon which subsequent proposed improvements can be made, whilst considering the feedback impacts these changes may have on the SLA program as a whole.

Ultimately it is proposed that minimal changes are required. The SLA program presents a quality approach to incorporating many of the theoretically proposed approaches to addressing leader development. The comprehensive nature of the overall program, as evidenced from the experiences of the author, suggest that little change is required to this program to make it any more effective than it already is at addressing the development of leaders and leadership within organisations.
Introduction

People development is often promoted by organisations as a key commitment or focus for future organisational success (Ready and Conger, 2003; Laljani, 2007). This may be driven by belief of a risk to a sustainable future supply of skilled resources to draw from or that learning and adaptability is a source of competitive advantage in an environment that faces more frequent forces to change and adapt (McCall, 1998; Day, 2000; Fulmer and Goldsmith, 2001; Collins & Holton, 2004). Much of this focus is on developing leaders able to lead the organisation to success in uncertain future environments (McCall, 1998; Collins & Holton, 2004).

There are a range of approaches to developing future leaders, including skills based training, coaching, intensive feedback approaches and on the job learning (McCall, 1998; Collins & Holton, 2004; McCauley et al, 2004). This review considers one particular program used as a means of expanding participants’ worldviews, relationships and experiences. The Strategic Leadership Acumen (SLA) program brings together a group of individuals to undertake an experience that facilitates learning for the individual and group whilst addressing a topic of potential benefit to the organisation. Focusing on the experiences of one particular SLA group, which included the author, this review will seek to illustrate how such a program successfully operates and the impact it has on the learning experiences of participants. A framework is proposed in order to illustrate the subsystems that exist within the program’s approach. Consideration can then be given to proposals for adjustments to particular aspects of the program that may have provided improvements to the achieved outcome, as assessed from the perspective of the author.

Leadership

Leadership is a complex construct to which there is no clearly agreed definition (John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2002; Collins & Holton, 2004; Popper, 2005), however regular reference within many definitions is the existence of relationships (leader-followers), the involvement of influence and the requirement to achieve outcomes. Yukl (2002: 7) suggests that “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives”. Similarly House et al (2002) identify the definition of leadership, arising from the 1994 GLOBE research conference, as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members” (pg 3).
There are many perspectives that consider the leader as the identifier, creator, driver and controller of organisational outcomes, built largely on the premise of leaders being able to identify and control changes required to achieve their planned outcomes (Robbins and Barnwell, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2001; Hodge et al, 2005). Many of these perspectives define leadership in the context of a leader and in terms of the traditional hierarchical approach to organisations. An alternate perspective to leadership has developed from the application of complexity theory to the social science of leadership and aligns to the concept of organisations being considered complex adaptive systems (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001, 2002). It proposes that leadership is an emergent property of an interaction between dynamic agents within a system (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Lichtenstein et al, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al, 2007; Avolio et al, 2009). An example of this is the various key influencers that exist in subgroups throughout a larger organisational system and are often identified as key enablers or blockers to change and organisational outcomes (Johnson-Cramer et al, 2007; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001). This developing concept of emergent leadership, existing as a social act of relational dialogue (Uhl-Bien, 2006), presents interesting challenges to the historic approaches to leader development.

**Leadership and Leader Development**

The core of this review is on the concept of Leader development, with a focus on the perspectives and learnings of the author, but consideration also needs to be made of the broader construct of Leadership development in organisations (Day, 2000; Popper, 2005). Leader development is regarded as “the expansion of a person’s capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004:2), including the individual developing capability in preparation to undertake varied roles and respond to unforeseen challenges that future environments present (Day, 2000). Leadership development is more concerned with the building of relationships and networks that enable and utilise social capital (Day, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2003; Popper, 2005) as a means of enabling leadership as an emergent capability formed through groups and collectives (Day, 2000; Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004).

Whilst the concept of leader development usually has a focus on the individual growth in knowledge, a well balanced development of leaders within an organisation should not exclude the recognition that such learning approaches can involve groups of developing leaders so that key relational capabilities are developed as well as the development of networks arising from such interactions (Day, 2000). Conger and Benjamin highlight the fact that leader development is often “no longer focused on the individual learner but increasingly on shaping the worldviews and behaviours of cohorts of managers” (in Collins & Holton, 2004:1). It is proposed that including group interaction as part of the approach to Leader development helps develop awareness of others (Raelin, 2004) and key relational capabilities that are a crucial part of being effective in leadership roles and processes (Day, 2000). Furthermore an approach that is able to do this through the construction of an experiential environment incorporates one of the most prominent methods of leader development (Raelin 2004; Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004; Popper, 2005), thereby allowing groups of learners to address and learn from real organisational issues (Collins & Holton, 2004).
A key challenge for such modern leader development to consider is the concept of emergent leadership rather than traditional concepts of leadership development based on the context of power and control (Ready and Conger, 2003; Raelin, 2004). With leadership as an emergent property of an interaction between dynamic agents within a system, learning does not simply develop from the passing of knowledge from one person to another but evolves from the social relations of the system as learners reflect together on their assumptions and findings (Raelin, 2004). A quality approach could allow for this by creating situational learning for individuals to interact with others in order to investigate how they bring together their diverse worldviews to develop new means to approach unique challenges, thereby sharing leadership whilst developing the networks and relational capabilities key to modern leadership (Murphy & Riggio, 2003). The potential to add elements of skill based knowledge and opportunities for individual reflection, as a means of supplementing and embedding new capabilities through an awareness of learning, could make for a very effective modern development intervention able to be provided for a range of organisational members, making them more effective in the various leadership actions and processes they undertake from time to time (Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004).

**SLA Background**

In March 2008, sixteen participants came together to complete an instance of the Strategic Leadership Acumen (SLA) program. This particular group involved a range of managers from different NAB departments including Business Banking, Risk & Credit Management, Property Finance, Process Improvement, Training and Development and Finance.

The SLA Program involves completing a team project that includes the investigation and selection of a focal topic for recommendation to NAB to undertake, followed by the development and presentation of a business case to a panel of senior management. This is supported by facilitators and formal knowledge development, aimed at expanding participants’ perspectives and capabilities, as well as including an organisational sponsor to provide guidance and feedback on behalf of the organisation and support the reflection by participants.

For me as a participant, I enrolled in the program to explore how I could improve my level of business acumen, expand the initial development from the early stages of my Masters of Business Leadership (being undertaken at the same time) and investigate this as a potential development program for use in the business units I work with as an internal change consultant. The resulting program experience did teach me some new theories and then provide the opportunity to apply them immediately in a practical situation through the workings of the group and the project. However it also provided me experiences that contributed to a greater self awareness of my behaviour in similar interaction circumstances and the exposure to new relationships throughout the organisation that have since been leveraged when required, to the benefit of myself and the organisation.
The construct of the SLA Program

To assist in reflecting upon the program and consider how things could have been different, there are three elements which all come together in achieving the overall outcome. These are the team project (actions and participant interactions), the individual (my actions and perceptions) and the program approach (refer Figure 1). The interactions of these elements, and the component parts of each element, provide a framework that enables a basis upon which proposed amendments to the approach can be considered in relation to the overall context of the SLA Program.

Figure 1: The inter-related elements constituting the SLA development program

The Team Project

The participants initially came together to complete the SLA as a personal development program. As part of this program the participants were expected to undertake an initiative that involved the selection of a topic, development of a plan, completion of the planned tasks, and finally the delivery which required the presentation of a business case to senior executives at NAB.
As these stages evolved, the design of the stages, the planned outcome and several other inputs, in particular the core learning component of the program, impacted the internal dynamics of the team in such a way that resulted in driving convergence in the thinking and actions of the individuals within the team (represented in figure 2 by the converging lines). At the start, the group members each had different perspectives on a range of potential topics to address as a project. In this particular case it took some time for the group to reduce this to two potential subjects, conduct further research and then vote to select the focal topic. From here, the thinking and work of the group focused on the single subject, but their perspectives and definitions still differed. The dynamics of the team and the environment around it, together with the pressure of ensuring a quality recommendation to senior management at the planned end date, forced the team to discover the points of convergence in the various worldviews and establish the suitable roles that enabled them to deliver a successful outcome.

In explanation above, the use of “group” and “team” at different points was deliberate. The dynamics at the commencement represented the interactions of a group of different people. This is in part evidenced by the requirement of the use of voting to reach group consensus early on, as discussion was not sufficient to find the point of agreement. In later stages when acting more as a team, it was possible for dialogue and influencing techniques to result in the delivery of consensus.
The Individual

Each member of the project team can be considered to have an impact on each other team member and on the outcomes of the team project in total. Therefore in reviewing the approach and outcomes it is important to consider the framework of the individual in the context of the program.

Drawn from my personal experience it is proposed that the actions of the individual during the program can be considered at the micro level as illustrated in figure 3:

Figure 3: Micro-level perspective of individual action within the program
(derived from The 4E Model of the Coaching Process, IMIA, 2005)

At the micro level, the individual goes through various iterations of forming intent to a particular action or course of action, conducting the action and then reflecting and reviewing the outcomes of that action, before commencing the cycle again, this time with the experience gained in the previous iteration. Several external factors, most notably the coaching elements of the program enabled through the provision of skilled facilitators and an organisational sponsor, also drive and influence the forming of individuals’ intent as well as their willingness and perspective to reflect and review.

From the perspective of the program intent, it is considered possible to use experience within the program, reflection and other external factors to facilitate learning in the individual that contributes to a broadening of the worldview and growth in the experience and capabilities of the individual throughout the program (represented by the widening arrows in figure 4).

Figure 4: Meso-level perspective of individual action within the program
The Learning Program

The learning component of the program provides facilitated support and the role of a sponsor. These generate several influences on both the team and the individuals including:

1) Setting of project expectations
2) Challenging to verify the selection of the focal topic
3) Guidance and stakeholder feedback
4) Exposure to skills based knowledge with topics such as systems thinking and relational and trust capital
5) Challenging to stimulate regular reflection in individuals and the group

The interventions provide a means by which individual and team learning can be guided towards a positive outcome from the program. However the overall outcome is also dependent on the behaviour of the individuals and behaviour of the team as a whole, and how all of these subsystems impact on each other to influence the outcome.

The relationship of the three elements

The interrelationship of these elements could be illustrated as follows:

Figure 5: Combination and relationship of the three elements
Apart from the basis of how the learning program impacts on the team and individual, figure 5 also seeks to illustrate some examples of where the team and individual also impact upon each other. This is a key aspect to allow for as this paper seeks to consider what may have improved the outcome, with any interventions likely to have a feedback impact to other elements of the overall program.

**Reflections from the program and the outcomes**

From the above illustrations of the program, its intended interventions and the resulting feedback amongst the sub-systems that constitute the environment in which the program operates, the approach appears very sound relative to the key considerations of leader development highlighted earlier in this review. In particular the SLA:

1. Is based on a group environment that requires individual leaders to interact with others to explore different worldviews and find common meaning and alignment in order to achieve an outcome.
2. Creates experiential learning for participants that incorporates the concept of emergent leadership within the group.
3. Provides supplementary knowledge development on key foundation leadership topics such as systems thinking in order to facilitate the other elements of the program.

Given this, no significant change to the program is proposed. However following the completion of the group’s work together, and given the time that has since progressed, a few interesting areas of reflection have been made that might influence two perspectives:

1. Program: how might some aspects of such a program be undertaken next time?
2. Self: how might I act in similar circumstances next time?

**Learnings about the program**

1. **The formation of the initiative team and resulting individual participation**

   Members of the SLA group came together each with the goal of completing personal development through the SLA program, however they soon discovered they needed to work together as a group towards a secondary goal - to pick a topic, research and present a case for it. For some, it became evident that they were not necessarily motivated by the topic, rather just
by the desire to complete the program as if it were a traditional, individual learning approach. This resulted in the formation of sub groups with varied levels of commitment within the overall team for the outcomes of the initiative and possibly limited some members from access to the full developmental benefit intended by the program.

It is known that the degree to which individuals are prepared to engage with the development approach and the resulting level of learning they take away from any experience varies (Conger & Ready, 2003; Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004). Whilst this is a decision to be made solely by the individual it is proposed that there may be an approach that could be included in the program to increase the potential of the individual to choose to participate, or at least be more aware of their decision not to be active and therefore still learn from the inaction. That approach is the more extensive use of reflection as a source of learning. This could be completed as individuals alone or with the assistance of a helper, such as the sponsor or facilitators (Daudelin, 1996). It could be developed around the concept of a personal learning diary that is reviewed with the facilitator at key points throughout the program and may also include a summative report at the end of the program to bring together all the participant’s experiences and reinforce the aspects of their learning that have changed since commencement of the program. The use of facilitator reviews at key points in the program supports the review steps within the individual subsystem proposed above, as well as providing a means by which the program subsystem can influence those members that may not be aware or open to the benefits that their active participation can generate.

2) Varied experience of the team

One aspect of leader development that may have been missing initially for many members of the group was an appreciation of the diversity of thought in the context of the group working as a team. Each member had different skills and background and for some this had a more direct impact on the topic and activities being undertaken, whilst those with less directly relevant skills were possibly left a bit behind and out of it. In future it may be preferable to try and introduce into the knowledge learning component an introduction to the values of the diversity of thought as a potential influence to a greater appreciation for each member, thereby improving their inclusiveness and accelerating the development of trust and networked collaboration within the group, both key attributes to the development and leverage of the social capital amongst members that will enable the achievement of individual and group outcomes (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Adler and Kwon, 2002). This will not guarantee that all members would apply the learning but it may potentially increase the awareness of group members to be somewhat more accommodating to each other rather than controlling, which their past development and environmental reinforcement may have inadvertently focused on. Furthermore if it is able to have an influence on some individuals then it should have a positive feedback effect through all subsystems presented above, improving team formation and operation.
This finding arises from reflecting on my own behaviour and the realisation that as a more natural extravert, I need to find ways to better incorporate those with less obvious skills. In this instance at the very least, I should have had a role in making them feel more involved so as to create the opportunity for them to potentially be more participative.

3) The need for more directive leadership to achieve outcomes

Despite the intent for participants to experience and reflect on the emergence of leadership within the group that started out as a collection of peers, it was interesting to find members of the group actively looking for or passively deferring to specific sources of leadership. Whilst emergent leadership theory does not discount the importance of overall leaders as influencers on groups of interacting dynamic agents (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2002; Uhl-Bien et al, 2007), the blatant demand for this from some participants potentially reveals an aspect for further study. The strong impact of hierarchical thinking in organisations, the concepts of control and the methods by which leaders have been developed and influenced to date may be too strongly entrenched for developing leaders to fully appreciate their need to explore the complexity of the environments they operate in as opposed to the simple management theories they are often presented with (Ghoshal, 2005). This does not diminish or change the program’s intent to start to influence this type of thinking, rather it highlights that further consideration to how this is influenced within the organisation and the broader leadership development program across the organisation if such capability is desired by the organisation.

An alternative perspective is that the participants were simply looking to management direction rather than actual leadership. Without wanting to wade into the complexities of the differences between management and leadership (Collins & Holton, 2004) in this review, it will simply be considered that management includes the aspects of control, administration and organisation required to coordinate a group in a functioning capacity. Whilst further investigation and thought would be interesting on the topic of what the team was seeking, for now it is considered that the role being sought was for someone to facilitate and influence the participants and the networks amongst members in order to explore opportunities, agree outcomes and decide on approaches to individual and collective effort required to accomplish the agreed outcomes. This is in line with the definitions of leadership proposed in this review (Yukl, 2002).
Learnings about Myself

My Behaviours and preferred styles within groups

Aware of the fact that I have a more natural extroverted style and that I tend to take leadership roles within groups, I deliberately attempted to initiate a more submissive role in order to observe the program and the team, as this was one of my reasons for completing the SLA. However before long I was back in a leadership role, right through to the final presentation (refer Appendix 3: My role within the SLA team project).

Initial reflection led to a belief that my experiences in the MBL program, being undertaken at that time, as well as the nature of the project being aligned to the nature of my type of role in the organisation led to creating a perceived value that other team members considered that I brought to the group, in effect building my social capital within the group. They responded to this by influencing me to step up and assist, particularly as the group was not yet operating as a team and falling further and further behind in respect to the time line.

Further reflection using the model presented above (refer Figure 5) has however raised a different perspective on how this may have come about. Instead of passive development of social capital as originally considered, more specific reflection on my early role as an individual within the group helped me remember that I was actively influencing members and outcomes of the group, just not in such an obvious and direct manner. Through occasional questions and 1-on-1 conversations with other influential members, my individual actions still significantly influenced the means by which the group found common views and perspectives with regards to the goals and actions of the group. The outcomes of the early stages were ultimately in line with my developing preferences, so there was likely some degree of influence achieved with this approach. However rather than continue to operate effectively with this form of facilitative leadership (Blackbourn et al, 2000), the group appears to have required a more obvious source of leadership to follow. This resulted in several of the more participative members approaching me and asking me to actively lead the planning phase.

As previously raised, this behaviour is an area of further investigation unable to be resolved with this review, but it could be of interest to future programs to understand whether there was a natural tendency to have dominant leadership behaviours to follow or whether I was supported to play key leadership roles because my nature was to be facilitative and enable the inclusion of others. The risk to the outcome would have been a dominant style that created opportunity for like-minded members and restricted the contribution of those with alternate worldviews. Theory and logic suggest that the best outcomes, both for the initiative and the program, come
from the inclusion of multiple worldviews before finding the areas of common satisfaction in a solution, but these outcomes may potentially suggest that past influences of power and authority leadership approaches still hold a strong influence on participants today.

Therefore further personal reflection is also required to learn whether there are strong controlling elements that have been embedded in my behaviours already arising from my career development to date or whether there is something else within the complexity that is leadership that may help explain my apparent natural tendencies. For the program, there is not something specifically required to be amended to address this development in the interaction of the subsystems that made up this SLA program. Rather the introduction of reflective practices as proposed above would assist members in being aware of their own similar behaviours in such a situation, or for other group members to become more aware of their role in requiring such obvious and dominant approach to the concept of leadership within their teams.

Concluding thoughts regarding the learnings made

Hindsight is a very powerful tool. It should be considered that whilst it is possible at the completion of a particular event such as this to identify clear points where variation may have produced a better outcome, this “enlightened perspective” might not always be so obvious if I was to now start a new, similar type of event. However personal learnings from this program would likely still be applied in some form to any new event, after allowing for variation given the different circumstances involved. This is a major benefit from the type of experiential learning approach being used (Raelin 2004; Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004; Popper, 2005).

Conclusion

Despite the focus arising from the proposed importance of developing leaders, there remains a challenge in establishing an effective approach that can address many of the capabilities and skills leaders need in order to improve their abilities to deal with different, changing environments. The SLA program presents a quality approach to incorporating many of the theoretically proposed approaches to addressing leader development. The comprehensive nature of the overall program results in the interactions amongst three core subsystems, with changes to any aspect of the overall program requiring consideration as to how this would feedback through the related systems. However it is evidenced from the experiences and reflections of the author that little change is required to this comprehensive program to make it any more effective than it already is at addressing the development of leaders and leadership within organisations.
References


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**Appendix 1 – Submitted Report**

Copy of the business case submitted to the panel and the presentation given (excluding the skit).

**Appendix 2 – Roles in constructing this report**

A source independent to IMIA and NAB was used to proof read the paper for clarity and explanation of principles and arguments raised throughout.

Professor Ramzi Fayed provided feedback and support in the development of my learning and forming of the means by which I was able to suitably reflect on the learnings I had made.

All support provided is greatly appreciated.
Appendix 3 – My Role within the SLA Team Project

Topic selection and initial learning sessions
Aware of my tendency to be a leader within many of the groups I was involved in, I was consciously trying to be quieter and more subdued than usual at the outset.

Following the completion of the training elements involved in the SLA, some group members started to request me, together with others that did this type of work in their roles, to take on more responsibility.

Action Planning
The group convinced me to take a more obvious leadership role for this phase, resulting in me coordinating and facilitating the session that focused the topic on Diversity of Thought, as well as developed the tasks, timelines and roles of everyone in the group in order to successfully meet the overall deadline.

Case Development
I was initially involved in the sub-group developing the white paper case. This included:

a- influencing the structure

b- completing the sections of Tomorrow, Recommendations (including Value Proposition), Conclusion and Executive Summary

c- contributing to the Costs & Risks section

Presentation Development & Delivery
The team developing the presentation had created a skit similar to a future nabTV interview. In reviewing the presentation as a group it was decided we needed to complete our presentation with a summary of the white paper and some of the influencing detail in our case. Another author of the white paper and I offered to pull together the closing parts of the presentation, however during a brief discussion I was influenced to take the role as the presenter responsible for bringing the case together and formally pitching the request to the panel.