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*Insight into a new  
process of self-  
discovery for leaders  
that bridges the gap  
between leadership  
theory and practice*

# **Leader as Action Researcher**

Discovery in Action<sup>®</sup>:

An applied leadership development process

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*This article describes the genesis of a unique applied leadership development process, and the insights from its implementation in practice.*

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Many innovations start life as a curiosity. Such curiosities often arise as we become aware of a ‘gap’ through our observations of the world. Often these curiosities emerge in relatively innocuous circumstances. This was my experience. I (one of the authors) was sitting in a session as part of my master’s studies listening to a presentation from another student about his observations and investigations into the challenges and problems with people leadership and management in his organisation. I was being present, respectful and open to learning something new. But then I had a subversive thought, one I knew that I was not supposed to have in this learning environment – ‘geez, I’ve heard all this before; when I am going to hear something new’. As I slowly tuned out to the other student’s presentation and drifted into my inner world the question arose for me ‘why, with the surfeit of literature, training courses, seminars, tools, instruments over the last 40 years are we still grappling so much with this concept of leadership?’ It could not possibly be due to a lack of information on the topic – heaven knows how many books and articles have been written about leadership (452 million results when you type into Google). Most managers and leaders have had some exposure to the theories and models over the years – they have read the articles and the books, they have had the ‘training’, they have seen the powerpoint presentations on the 10 keys to leadership success. Yet many still struggle with the *practice of leadership* – the consistent application of these theories and models in the workplace. It seemed to me that the issue was not so much about acquiring the knowledge as applying it. The fundamental question I then posed myself was: ‘How do we bring theory and action closer together?’ This is not necessarily a new question, but one that provided a point of focus for my musings. It triggered a range of other questions:

- Do most people leaders have their own clearly defined leadership philosophy – a set of beliefs about what brings out the best in people? What if they did, what might they do with it?
- How do you achieve real and lasting behaviour change in leadership practice?

How do we get leaders to actually do something and sustain it?

- How aware are leaders about how their day-to-day actions impact the motivations and behaviours of the people they lead?

Leadership development is a well-tilled field. There are many and numerous interventions and processes that have been developed and deployed over the years with the intention of developing leadership capability and practice. Such interventions include classroom based training, seminars, simulations, job rotations, 360-degree feedback, various personality or behavioural instruments, mentoring, coaching, action learning and reflective practice. Certainly in recent times there is an emerging consensus around the value of context driven workplace based programs with an emphasis on reflective practice and continuous learning.

So, in this crowded field of leadership development, I was still vexed by the question of what development activity may take us closer to bridging the gap between the plethora of leadership theory and its consistent and effective practice. At the time a core element of my master’s studies was in the field of action science, action research and action learning. So, as often happens with innovation and ideas generation, the connection between a specific curiosity and a frame of reference, in this case action research, generated insight into a possibility.

### Leader as action researcher

The concept that emerged from this thinking is that of people leaders being action researchers into their own leadership practice. In following this approach, leaders become the subject of their own research. There has been much written about action research - it is not the intent, nor is it necessary, to attempt to describe it in detail here. In the most simple of terms it is about research leading to action and that action re-informing the research. When thought about in that way its potential value in helping close the gap between leadership theory and practice becomes clear. In very broad terms *leader as action researcher* involves a people leader exploring the following key questions:

- When do I believe people perform at their best?
- What have I got to do to get them to perform at their best?
- How well am I doing those things?

- What improvement actions do I need to undertake?
- What are the results of my actions?

At a conceptual level it sounds straightforward. The key design challenge was to develop a leadership development activity that was practical, workplace based and time efficient. The concept that emerged (back in 2007 and is largely the same today 170 participants later) has two dimensions from a design perspective - the process that leaders should work through; and the way it should be structured as a development program.

In general terms the ‘leader as action researcher’ process involves leaders working through a series of steps. It should be noted that whilst these steps are described in a sequential fashion (see the exhibit “Process overview”) the components can merge and overlap with each other. Firstly, leaders develop their own people leadership model. They draw on their experiences and knowledge to articulate a set of statements about when they believe people perform at their best (usually about 5 – 10 statements) and then identify the ideal behaviours that they, as people leaders, need to undertake to get the best out of their people. An extract of an actual example generated by a leader is provided as in the exhibit “An example leadership model”. The model is simple in its structure and is fully captured in only a handful of pages.

Secondly, leaders self-reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in executing their model by making notations against each of the behaviours articulated in their model.

Thirdly, leaders generate data through engagement with the most appropriate people (usually, but not limited to, their staff) that will help them gain insight into the validity of their leadership model and the extent to which they are effectively executing their model.

Fourthly, they reflect upon that feedback to develop a simple and concise action plan. Typically this involves three to five key actions or behaviours that they are going to implement over a number of months. In essence the action plan represents a series of experiments they are going to undertake to improve their people leadership practice.

Finally, leaders take action and reflect and learn from their experiences. Throughout the course of the process leaders are encouraged to keep a reflective journal – as a researcher they use the journal to capture field notes of their

research – observations, reflections, curiosities and insights.



The above described process could be undertaken by any individual leader at any time. However a critical piece of the design was also to think about the most effective way to structure this as a leadership development activity for a group of people either undertaking a leadership development program or a business or division trying to create a culture of leadership. What will work best to get leaders to actually commit to action? How do we ensure sustainability in behaviours? How can it be done in a time efficient manner that can be quickly integrated in the workplace?

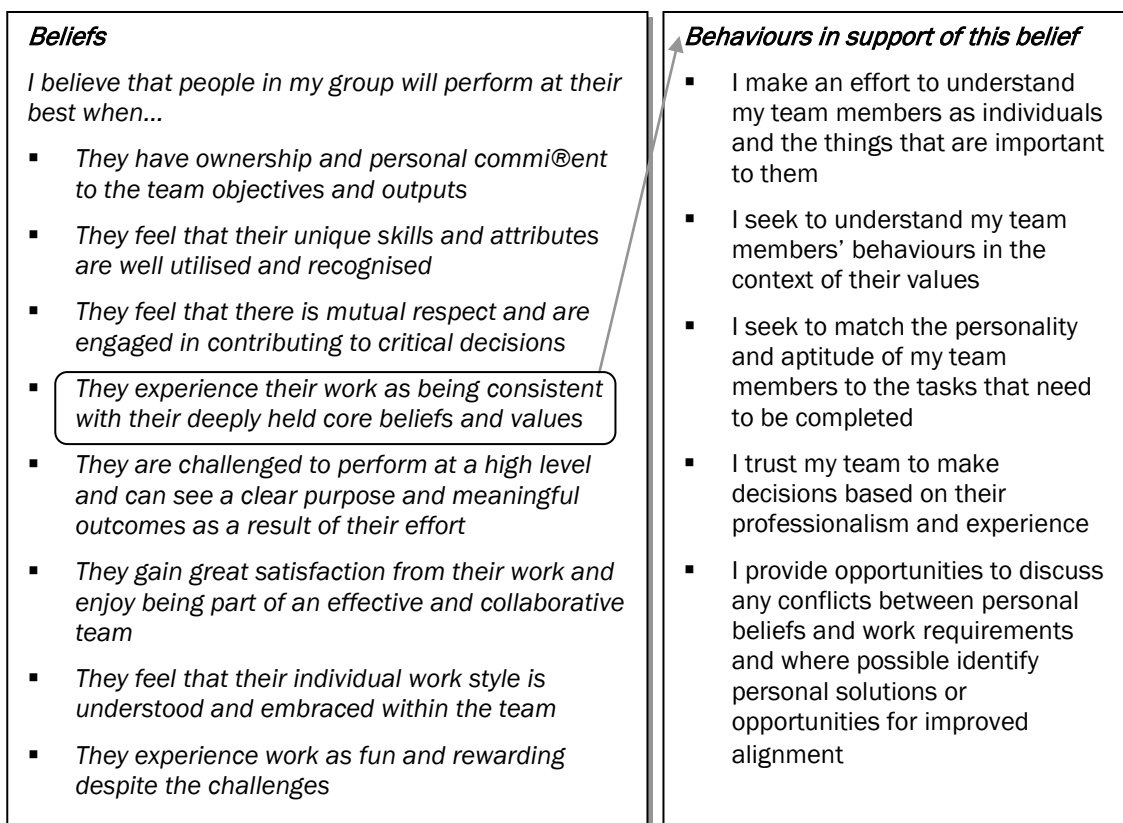
In simple terms what we came up with was a form of a ‘community of practice’. This involves peer groups of five people leaders from across an organisation working through the five-step process with the aid of an experienced facilitator supported by a series of seven two-three hour meetings approximately one-month apart. In programs that we have run, typically we have had a cohort of 20 people participating in the program where the first and the last meetings are held as a cohort of 20, while the small group meetings of five peers are run for meetings 2 through 6. It is important to note that whilst the program is undertaken with the support of peers and a coach, it is an individual development program. The use of peers is extremely powerful in sharing and making sense of experiences and knowledge, providing a feeling of mutual support around challenging personal insights and issues, as well as the ‘peer pressure’ to work through the process and provide the public commitment to action. The facilitator plays a critical role in creating and holding a safe space that allows for dialogue, reflection and exchange of ideas. The facilitator also ensures appropriate focus to the conversations and moving people through the process as well as forcing the quality of thinking and introduction of various concepts, models, research and experiences that might be helpful. The other key feature of

the program is the timeframe. The six to seven month period of the program provides sufficient time for people to practice and experiment with new behaviours and reflect upon and learn from them – this is critical to helping sustain new behaviours over time. Also, the small group two-hour meetings, held one month apart, are easy to schedule into diaries for busy leaders and managers. The one month gap between meetings allows time for the key activities to be undertaken – to think deeply about their leadership model, to test their model with others, to experiment with new behaviours and actions and to reflect upon their experiences.

The program can be run both as a stand alone program or be part of a broader leadership development program that involves other typical leadership development activities. Due to the period over which it is run it can become the thread or vehicle through which many other leadership development elements are more deeply explored.

In essence it is probably best described as an applied leadership development program designed to bridge the gap between leadership theory and practice. We call it *Discovery in Action*<sup>®</sup>.

### An example leadership model



**Power in simplicity**

On the face of it, it is an extremely simple process. In fact it is at risk of being dismissed as simplistic, particularly in the field of leadership development that is increasingly introducing sophisticated assessment tools and psychological frameworks. It is extremely simple, however the **power comes from this simplicity**. In fact its simplicity is one of its great strengths as participants are able to easily 'get the task' and thus concentrate their energies on the thinking and action. The insights gained by leaders and the new behaviours and actions taken demonstrate the impact of the process (see the exhibit "Insights from participants") and the value of its simplicity.

**There are a number of distinguishing aspects of the process that contribute significantly to its impact.** In the first phase of the process the leaders are asked to explore the question *when do people perform at their best?* This is a critical starting point to the process because it asks them to genuinely **empathise** and explore and understand followers' needs and the conditions under which their performance will be optimised. It effectively puts them in the shoes of an applied behavioural scientist and forces them to think about their role as a leader of people, not as chief technician. Most importantly at this stage of the process they are working with the mind set 'it's about them, not me'. So,

contrary to many leadership development activities, the leaders are looking outside of themselves first – to the people they lead, not looking inwardly at leadership characteristics, styles or behaviours.

As part of the process leaders document their own people leadership model. This has two essential elements – five to ten statements about the conditions under which people perform at their best and for each of those statements a set of about half a dozen 'I' statements about the behaviours or actions that they would need to undertake on a consistent basis to create those conditions. For many the task of documenting their leadership model is the first time they have put deliberate, purposeful effort into clarifying their thinking about leadership – the writing process becomes the thinking process, not merely an artefact of the thinking. To be concise and succinct with their writing forces them to make choices, to reconcile dilemmas and to reach a considered view on matters that have often previously swum around, unordered in their brain. It is manifestly an act of **converting experience into knowledge**. Having created that 'knowledge' it provides a firm basis and confidence for action. Many are surprised about how easily it flows out, given the structure and process they work through. In our experience there is a remarkable consistency between the leaders' stated set of beliefs about when people perform at their best

**Insights from participants**

*I am making a practice of listening more, talking less and making decisions based on the listening. People accept this – it is not about me, it is about the team. Leadership is not a dance on my own.*

*I now have a structured way to look at leadership which helps me focus my thinking and identifies some key actions to work on. Breaking the approach down to some easier steps made it very accessible. In some ways it was a lot simpler than I expected.*

*I am being less directive and allowing the team to come to their own conclusions and trusting that they will usually be the right conclusions.*

*The process of trialling behaviours and checking of responses, was very purposeful and valuable. It has provided me with a frame for adaptive learning.*

*I spent time thinking about leadership so it was always in my head. It was valuable to write it down and talk about it. Small groups were great for reflection and insight.*

*I watched my own behaviour and realised that I was not the person I thought I was e.g. compassionate.*

*Often we know what we should do but we don't actually do it. I am being more conscious and deliberate now.*

*I am delegating more. I am still dealing with the 'letting go' and 'not knowing everything' but I am seeing success. I realise I can add value in other ways.*

and a high degree of alignment with common models of leadership – in many cases their statement of beliefs could easily represent the 10 chapter headings of most leadership books! It confirms that, in general terms, they actually know the theory (both from their own practice and from seminars, lectures and literature), but importantly it is expressed in their own words and they have commenced **internalising it for themselves**. One leader, having articulated one of his beliefs as being *people perform at their best when they are engaged by the work they are doing*, became immediately aware of the reasons for a staff member's underperformance. He was on the cusp of going down the route of attempting to formally manage underperformance, but rather he made a mind-set shift and asked himself the question 'how can I manage for performance?' He spent some time with the staff member and they reached a mutual agreement on some new work tasks that were much more aligned to the individual's skills and interests. A month later he reported back to his peer group on the program 'I cannot believe the difference in her performance!' Participants, just by becoming more conscious about their beliefs about leadership, start to change their thinking and leadership actions.

The process forces leaders to fundamentally **confront how their stated beliefs might be different from their beliefs in practice**. In the world of action science this is sometimes referred to as the gap between espoused theory and theory in use. The process of articulating their beliefs about when people perform at their best and the behaviours or actions they need to consistently enact is a reflective process as they think about themselves as followers and their own needs as well as themselves as leaders and their impact on the people they lead. Although this task is a private activity many leaders find it quite confronting. As they write realisations down on them about what they don't do well – it's my model yet I don't even follow it! One leader, when presenting her work to her peer group had omitted the 'I' in her statements. When the group questioned her as to why this was the case she explained, with some emotion, how she literally could not bring herself to write the word 'I' because 'I know I just don't do many of these things and I just couldn't write it'. In the case of one leader, who self-confessed to being very task-focussed, he did not have any 'I' statements under some of his more 'supporting people' belief statements. His explanation to the group was that 'I cannot even imagine what some of the things are that I should be doing in relation to these!' These are a couple of the more

extreme examples, however for many the struggle to write 'I' statements often leads to people taking action immediately in their workplace upon that realisation. We do, however, ask the leaders to more formally self-assess – which of those behavioural 'I' statements am I doing well, which of them am I not doing so well? This is when it often gets really interesting. It is not unusual to find that under one or two 'I believe when people perform at their best' statements participants have highlighted a handful of behavioural 'I' statements where they acknowledge (or have received feedback) they don't or rarely undertake. Working with the assumption that individuals' actions or non-actions are driven by a set of beliefs (the operating system buried in our brain) oftentimes not held at a conscious level, the question we explore is 'What are your real beliefs guiding your actions/non-actions then?' or 'What alternative beliefs are overriding these stated beliefs?' This often flushes out issues of control, fear of conflict or wanting to be liked. Once these beliefs are surfaced we can explore the validity of these beliefs. In one case a leader acknowledged that he often failed to hold honest evaluations sessions at the completion of major tasks, even though he had a stated belief in their importance and value. In reflecting upon this he articulated that, having been promoted from a group of peers who now reported to him, his real belief driving his non-action was that if he provided any critical or challenging feedback his authority would be undermined. He was now able to confront this fear and challenge its validity. By being able to reflect at a deeper level around unconscious beliefs it provides a firmer pathway for behavioural change as leaders become aware of the beliefs driving their behaviours and an ability to challenge those beliefs. It also provides a new framework for reflection that empowers leaders in their continuous efforts to learn from experience.

As participants in the program the leaders are asked, as action researchers, to **generate data** that provides them with insight into the validity of their leadership model and the accuracy of their perceptions of their relative strengths and areas for improvement. They are responsible for making their own choices about who they speak to and how they approach the task. In most cases the leaders will seek feedback from their staff - their followers. Many have also engaged with past employees, their manager, other peer colleagues, outside mentors or even spouses and family members. Over the years we have seen numerous different approaches followed, the most common of these include one-on-one chats with people, incorporating into two-way

performance conversations and team meetings. One fellow presented his model to a room of 30 staff and asked for feedback, another facilitated his team to develop a leadership model and then compared with his, one participant attached a tea bag to her model and sent it to her direct reports with a request to discuss over a cup of tea. A few others have converted into a 360-degree instrument and administered it as a survey, followed by a team discussion over the results. **Most importantly they own the process and the choices that they make.** For some participants it is a confronting exercise and they take some time to 'steel themselves' for the task, however it is often through observing a couple of their peers do it that it gives them the impetus and confidence to 'have a go'. Consistently the leaders express surprise at the generosity of people in providing the feedback – they find people generally intrigued by the process, impressed at their courage and keen to want to help and provide genuinely constructive feedback and insight. In many cases it confirms some areas of improvement for them and it occasionally shows up some issues of which they were completely unaware. For one woman she discovered how some of her physical mannerisms and facial expressions were having a negative impact on her interactions with her staff. It can also highlight areas of perceived strength that they hadn't realised or they had underestimated and undervalued their importance. Another factor that comes into play, which is a feature of action research, is that the act of asking for feedback changes the situation itself – generating data in a social research context is not impact free. So, by 'putting themselves out there', sharing their beliefs and asking for feedback on performance as a leader it often results in the further development of trust between the leader and their staff. This can be a powerful positive benefit of the process, even before taking any specific improvement actions.

One of the most powerful aspects of the process is the **leaders working together as a community of practice** with other people leaders and being led by a facilitator. It provides a safe and supportive forum for leaders to talk about people leadership challenges, successes and failures which they rarely get the opportunity to do. At its most basic operating level it throws up many practical ideas, strategies and examples of how peers have dealt with challenging and difficult people leadership situations – many find just getting such ideas from their peers incredibly valuable. At another level there is a great sense of the leaders feeling supported by their

colleagues in their efforts to improve their leadership practice. Peers regularly provide words of encouragement and feedback to each other that provide confidence to experiment with new actions and behaviours. On the flip side the existence of the peer group and the regular meetings provide a subtle pressure to do the work so they don't let their colleagues down. **The peer group provides a critically important impetus to action.** The peer group also works collegially to **support** individuals in their efforts to **make sense of their experiences.** In many cases, with the guidance of an expert facilitator, the group coaches an individual through questioning, discussion and offering of suggestions to help generate insight into an individual's situation. Through such dialogue the leaders also are able to practice some key leadership skills such as questioning, active listening, exploration and reflection which enhance their capabilities in the workplace. For many leaders they experience these peer sessions as a completely different style of business meeting – there is an intimacy, a sense of trust and a real appreciation of the value of 'slowing things down'. This does not necessarily result in attempts to replicate this style of meeting in other situations; however some leaders use the experience to experiment to some degree as to how they lead their own leadership team meetings. The other major impact from the peer group meetings is the new networks it creates across an organisation. In some cases the peer groups continue to meet well after the conclusion of the program to continue their relationships and consequent working across organisational boundaries.

The framework for the leadership model provides a structure that enables leaders to really **focus their reflective thinking and make sense of their experiences.** The people leadership model most critically represents the leader's theory or assumptions about cause and effect... *people will perform at their best when these conditions exist and if I consistently and effectively undertake these actions and behaviours I will create these optimal performance conditions.* Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers of action research, is quoted as saying 'there is nothing quite as practical as a good theory'. Leaders, having such a theory, are then in a unique position to use that framework to reflect upon their experiences. In attempting to make sense of their experiences, particularly when results from their actions don't quite turn out as anticipated, they can ask such questions as: Were my beliefs about when people perform at their best flawed? Were my beliefs right but I chose less than appropriate actions or behaviours? Did I have the right

actions but did not execute them very well? We had one leader that in applying his belief that people perform best when they have clear expectations hoped to get better performance by setting a tight deadline on a piece of strategy work by one of his staff. He was very disappointed in the quality of work produced by the staff member. Through the peer group discussions he was helped to explore other elements of his theory with questions such as ‘to what extent was the staff member clear about the quality of work expected?’ and ‘did the staff member have the skills and experience to deliver on those expectations?’ The leader came to the realisation that he had over simplified the situation and that there were a range of other levers he needed to apply to optimise the staff member’s performance, including the provision of examples of high quality strategy documents that met his expectations and greater mentoring and guidance from himself. Having his leadership model clearly articulated in this cause and effect structure provided a really useful way of critically reflecting upon his experience and generating insights upon which he could act. This structure is particularly helpful for the many leaders that are not used to engaging in reflective practice. **It provides a means for both continuous evolution of their leadership model as well as their leadership practice.** Ultimately the goal is to increase their competency to learn from experience and enable reflection-in-action. We often provide the quote, attributed to T.S. Elliot, ‘we had the experience but we missed the meaning’ to emphasise the point that it is not just about having the experience but purposefully paying attention to that experience.

In the leadership development field organisations are often looking for *tailored* leadership programs that ensure their relevance to the organisation’s business and operating environment. This is an understandable and appropriate requirement. In the ‘leader as action researcher’ process **the context is the content.** It is not a content driven development activity, it is a process whereby the content is developed by the leaders themselves in their own context based on their knowledge and experiences and expressed in their own words and language. The model they produce is by its nature, situational. We do find a high degree of similarity in the beliefs espoused by leaders in relation to *when they believe people perform at their best*, often covering such things as goal alignment, people feeling supported, role clarity and performance expectations, teamwork and a sense of learning and growth. These elements of their model, however, are expressed in the leader’s own words. Also, the relative priority of these

beliefs can be dependent on the leader’s specific context. However when they come to articulate their ‘I’ statements in relation to the actions and behaviours that they will undertake in support of their beliefs about when people perform at their best we see considerable differences that derive from their different context and their different personal leadership styles. For example, some leaders are responsible for leadership of staff who are remotely located – this gives rise to a set of actions and behaviours that would not be expected of a leader that has staff immediately co-located. In the case of those leaders that have a large overall staffing responsibility with a handful of direct reports will incorporate different behaviours in their model than a leader of a six person team. They make choices as to what is most appropriate for their situation and that allow them to be authentic in their behaviours and are most suitable for the organisational culture. Most importantly they own it. It is created by them and is tailored and relevant to their circumstances. As they continue to obtain feedback, reflect and learn and their circumstances change, so does their leadership model evolve and develop.

### Our discoveries

As designers and facilitators of the process we are action researchers ourselves – experimenting, reflecting, learning, improving and making sense of our observations and experiences in coaching leaders through the process. We have had many of our own ‘aha’ moments and insights, some of which are about our personal practice as facilitators, some relating to the process itself and some relating to leadership development in general. A handful of our most fundamental discoveries are outlined below.

**Leaders are not empty vessels.** In terms of leadership development, most people are not empty vessels that need to be filled up with information and knowledge about leadership to improve their leadership practice. People in leadership roles have good experience of leading people and an understanding of leadership concepts and principles. It is *within them* – the challenge for leaders is to capture it as knowledge that they can and will put into action. Time and again, when sharing their leadership models, we are consistently blown away with the realisation ‘they know this stuff’! For many of them it is a re-discovery, rather than brand new insight, but in a form that has a greater utility and relevance to them. It has also become obvious to us that many leaders have not purposefully and deliberately thought about their leadership philosophy. It is



rare to find leaders having gone through the effort and discipline of articulating a clear theory as to when they believe people perform at their best and what actions and behaviours they need to consistently undertake to get the best out of their people. But, for the most part, it is our observation that this thinking and knowledge is within them – it just needs to be accessed.

**Self-discovery drives ownership and commitment.** The process asks leaders to undertake the deep thinking work, have the courage to seek feedback from others, be disciplined in taking action and reflective in making sense of their experiences. It is hard, confronting and challenging work. Along the way leaders make discoveries for themselves – they discover their own beliefs about leadership, they discover how those beliefs might differ from their practice, they discover how aligned their self-perceptions are to the perceptions of others and they discover what changes they need to make to their leadership practice and the effectiveness of the changes they make. The content is created solely by them and the discoveries belong to them. They completely own the choices they make and the results of the process. There are no imposed leadership frameworks, theories, models or instruments that they may or may not believe in and choose to ignore. The consequence of this is that it brings about an intense consciousness about their day-to-day leadership practice and a high degree of motivation for them to take action. However the process is not only a development activity; it is also a test. For some the discovery is that they do not have the desire to be a people leader. If they find the thinking too hard or uninteresting, obtaining feedback too challenging or have little enthusiasm for making changes it can result in the insight that they do not have what it takes for the discipline to be a great people leader. It does not happen often, but this is a legitimate and valuable outcome of the process. In some cases it provides great clarity and relief that they had previously been unable to articulate. It puts them in a position to make some appropriate career decisions.

**Leadership practice is situational.** Much of the knowledge and information that is available on the topic of leadership is either presented or interpreted as having some degree of universal application. At the more extreme end we are bombarded with the silver bullet solutions that offer the ‘secrets to successful leadership’. These should not be dismissed – they often contain highly useful fundamental principles – however they should not be

interpreted as a ‘user’s guide’ to leadership. We have observed that when working at the level of *beliefs about when people perform at their best* there is a reasonably high degree of consistency in the list of beliefs regardless of the context. However the relative priority of these beliefs is often implied to be different depending on the situation and current state of development of a leader’s group. More significantly, at the level of *behaviours that leaders need to undertake in support of those beliefs*, it is highly situational and context specific. You will not get these out of a book, lecture, seminar or training workshop – you might get some good ideas, but there will be no comprehensive checklist for you in your situation. You have to put the effort in to work it out for yourself. And even with that you will only have a list of ingredients, not a recipe. There will continue to be the day-to-day leadership challenges that result from the unique skills and motivations of the people that you lead as they interact with the environment in which you operate.

**Peer support is highly beneficial to individual leadership development.** Through running this process we have been privileged to witness the power of peer support to individual leadership development. It is also apparent how rare it is for forums to exist for people leaders to talk about their doubts, failures, successes and insights about leadership. People really value the sense of not feeling alone with these challenges. The benefits of the peer interactions are numerous: the testing of the quality of each other’s thinking; the learning from others; the sharing of experiences, tools and ideas; the genuine empathy and support in dealing with difficult issues; the subtle peer pressure to follow through with action; the group helping individuals make sense of their experiences; and the overall feeling of being ‘in it together’. We are convinced that peer support should be an integral part of leadership development.

**Leaders better understand their needs as followers.** One of our most unanticipated discoveries has been the value for leaders in being able to apply their people leadership model as a personal diagnostic tool to better understand their own satisfaction or otherwise with their work. As they articulate their beliefs about *when people perform at their best* they sometimes begin to ask themselves to what extent do these things hold true for them as a follower. In a handful of instances some leaders have been able, for the first time, to gain a clear insight into what is missing for them personally. This can be quite relieving and confronting as they realise they have

decisions to make or actions to take, sometimes in the form of *managing up*, to enable them to be more engaged and committed in their role.

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What we have described here is an applied leadership development process with empathy, self-discovery and peer support at its core. At first glance it is simple in its process and structure, however it is not simplistic. The process pushes leaders to achieve a depth of thinking and reflection that brings a high degree of consciousness to their day-to-day actions and behaviours. Fundamentally it drives leaders to truly apply the praxis cycle – practice informing theory, theory informing practice, practice informing theory so on and so forth – to their people leadership. In this way it addresses the original curiosity in relation to leadership development: ‘How do we bring theory and action closer together?’

The process as designed and implemented stands on the shoulders of a broad range of existing theories, tools and models, including emotional intelligence, reflective practice, appreciative inquiry, learning styles, self-directed learning models, motivation theory, communities of practice and action research. It integrates many of these concepts to create a *Discovery in Action*<sup>®</sup> methodology that is effective in bringing about significant personal growth and change in leaders. In that sense we believe that it is a powerful addition to the suite of leadership development activities in helping to bridge the gap between leadership theory and practice.

***About the authors***

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*Further information about their discoveries and the Discovery in Action<sup>®</sup> (Leading People) program can be found at [www.discoveryinaction.com.au](http://www.discoveryinaction.com.au)*

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