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SIMPLY THE BEST WORKPLACES IN AUSTRALIA – REDUX

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ABSTRACT

In 2003 the Business Council of Australia (BCA) commissioned Daryll Hull and Vivienne Read to undertake field work on the “best” workplaces in Australia, as defined by BCA members, using BCA criteria of “excellence” (Hull and Read 2003). This seminal work resulted in the formulation of a framework of fourteen attributes for best workplaces within the Australian work environment. In the decade since this work was published there have been other studies on workplace productivity and workplace leadership in Australia. This article restates and reviews the original BCA research, then opens up additional research topics in the area of excellence in workplace leadership.



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SIMPLY THE BEST WORKPLACES IN AUSTRALIA – REDUX

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CAN WE STEP INTO THE SAME RIVER TWICE?

The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated: *ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers*. Loosely transliterated the idea is that it is not possible to revisit the past as knowledge always move on. History flows like a river and new data, ideas and values overtake past thinking. Given the passing of the last decade, and the volume of newly published studies in workplace matters, what may we find if we step into the river carrying the 2003 study with us?

The research question is: are the conclusions of the 2003 study still valid today, or have they been overtaken by new ideas and new studies?

A comprehensive search of literature published on Australian workplace productivity since 2003 was undertaken in early 2014. From an analysis of in excess of 100 selected papers and refereed journal articles locally and overseas it appears that the underpinning ideas of the 2003 research remain constant. There have been no obvious studies published that contradict the 2003 findings, there are several articles that affirm them and even more articles which cite them as baseline guides/affirmation of their own work.

For example, the 2003 study (originally published on-line as a “Working Paper”) has been cited at least 34 times in 10 years as a reference for articles, books and refereed commentaries across a range of academic disciplines and topics across the past decade (e.g. Peetz 2005, Walker and Nogeste 2008, Gill 2008, Allan 2010, Harvey 2008, Stratford 2012). The 2003 study continues to be cited today.

(Google Scholar 2014 <http://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=sdgFehoAAAAJ&hl=en>)

There are dozens of positive current references to and citations of the 2003 study using a basic Google search under “Simply the Best Workplaces in Australia”. They range from articles in A Star Journals, submissions to government inquiries, blogs, references in book chapters, magazine and newspaper articles, and citations by commercial consulting groups who have used the 2003 work in the field. They are spread across Australia and overseas. Something in the study continues to resonate with people about the findings of the 2003 study. The time is now right to re-publish those findings and reflect on what might be done next.

SIMPLY THE BEST WORKPLACES 2003 - RESTATED

The BCA in the late 1990s was focused on managerial leadership as a means of improving business performance in Australia. Amongst their several interests was the idea of “high performance workplaces”. They defined such workplaces in the context of competitiveness and innovation, not job satisfaction for its own sake.

They made the linkage between all the workplace attributes and framed the issues as a challenge for management:

How can Australian enterprises grasp and create new opportunities emerging from globalisation, technological change and the knowledge economy? How can we create leading, high performance workplaces that are characterised by their creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness? Workplaces where people choose to work and give freely of their energies and feel and sense of personal achievement, satisfaction, individual purpose and security. Where there is synergy between personal missions and work challenges, and organizational achievement. And where the workplace sense of community contributes to overall social cohesion. (Business Council of Australia 1999)

This integrated vision of workplaces and productivity led to a desire by the BCA to understand in detail the drivers and enablers that make excellent workplaces. Their interest was in extremely good workplaces, not average or poor workplaces. The study they commissioned was thus designed to select some “good” workplaces and some “excellent” workplaces. The next step was to devise a method to compare and contrast the two categories of workplaces.

The researchers determined to use a paired case study approach:

*We had to find out what was **different** between good and excellent workplaces as it is reasonable to assume that most excellent workplaces at some stage were good workplaces trying to take a step up to high performance. By the time we had finished looking at the differences between the paired excellent and good workplaces, those differences stood out in sharp relief. (Hull and Read 2003)*

Most importantly, we selected two workplaces inside the same organisation. This was deliberately done to “level out” performance variations due to differing organisations’ culture and conditions – the paired workplaces were embedded in one enterprise culture, although usually in different locations and different functional areas.

WHAT EXACTLY WAS MEANT BY AN “EXCELLENT WORKPLACE” in 1999?

BCA General Criteria for Excellence

World Class - *this meant a workplace that could be seen to be at the top of its class in terms of like workplaces around the world. We asked each organisation to select two workplaces - one that was clearly outstanding and one that was reasonable in performance. The difference between the two workplaces was determined by performance measures normally used by the organisation.*

High performance - *meant outstanding business performance in terms of business outputs and business outcomes as defined by the company. We were looking for two workplaces that were close to the top in the measures, but with one being ahead of the other.*

Competitive - *meant cost and other measures of competition as described by the company. Also meant sustainable competitive advantage. We were looking for two workplaces that were very competitive, but one was ahead of the other.*

Innovative - meant the extent to which the workplace used new ideas and processes to achieve business outputs and business outcomes. These could be technology or people focused. We were looking for two workplaces that were seen to be innovative, but one was viewed as more innovative than the other.

Flexible/Adaptable - meant able to easily change work organisation, people and technology to meet changing business needs. We were looking for two workplaces that were clearly able to move resources around but one was more flexible than the other.

Fair - meant the extent to which the workplace was seen to be based on equitable and open behaviours by managers and staff. We were looking for two workplaces that were seen as fair, but one was seen to be more open and equitable than the other.

Personal achievement - meant the extent to which the workplace supported personal development and personal ambitions within the business. We were looking for two workplaces that had a track record of support of individual development, but one had a better record than the other.

Ethical - meant the extent to which behaviour in the workplace was seen to be in accord with community standards and wider moral imperatives. This was to be recognised through systems and practices as well as individual behaviours. We were looking for two workplaces that were ethical, but one was more systemic in its approach than the other.

Knowledge Based - meant the extent to which the workplaces relied on the explicit and implicit experiences of the members of the workplace and was able to create a sense of corporate memory about systems and processes. We were looking for two workplaces that were good at this, but one which had a more developed culture of knowledge creation, capture and management than the other; and

Individual, Team and Organisational Learning - meant the extent to which the workplace supported and created learning at every level. The measures of this would be incorporated in obvious areas such as training and development and competency-based programs, but also in informal and systemic approaches to on-the-job learning. We were looking for two workplaces that were excellent at supporting learning, but one was ahead of the other in implementation of such programs. (Hull and Read 2003)

GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WERE THE KEY TO EXCELLENCE IN 2003, AND REMAIN SO IN 2014

To restate the conclusions in the 2003 Study we must revisit the underpinning frame of reference we found useful in the work at that time. The frame of reference was drawn from the Australian Archetype Study undertaken by TELSTRA in the 1990s (Industry Business Skills Australia 2010). It aligns in part with the 1995 Karpin Report (Industry Business Skills Australia 2011) and other ground-breaking work undertaken in the 1990s. Between them these studies open a clear window into management and organisation practices in the Australian context that should easily lead companies and public agencies into the much sought after “productivity growth” scenarios of the 21st Century.

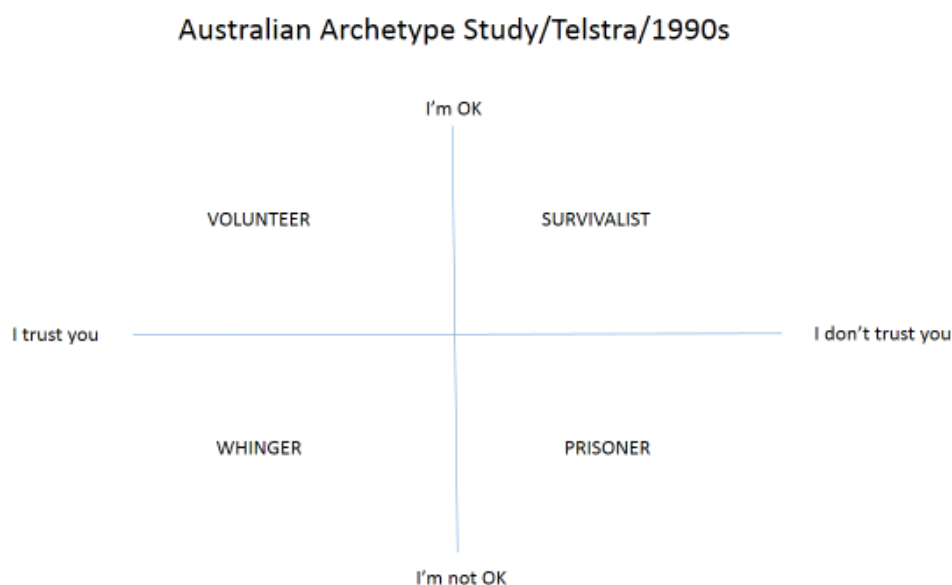
During the course of the Australian Archetype Study in the 1990s TELSTRA researchers undertook a series of surveys around the world looking for cultural similarities and differences in the way people at work perceived “quality” – the widely used terminology of the 1990s which today would be transliterated into a more current term - “high performance”. The global survey discovered that there were significant national cultural differences between uses of the term.

In Japan workers generally identified “quality” with “perfection”. In Germany “quality” was equated with “meets precise specifications”. In France it was “luxury”. In the United States it was “it works!” The unusual thing was that in Australian workplaces people saw “quality” as equated with “**the outcome of a good working relationship**”. This focus on working relationships took the TELSTRA research more closely into the drivers underpinning productive working relationships in Australia.

The conclusions they drew were simple and made considerable common sense:

- **Conclusion 1:** A good working relationships depends on firstly how I feel about myself in terms of self-respect and self-confidence; and secondly on how I feel about you in terms of trust. Do I trust you or not?
- **Conclusion 2:** If I am OK with myself and I trust you we have the basis of an excellent working relationship and thus a building block in the race for quality and high performance. This archetype was termed **VOLUNTEER** by the research frame of reference.
- **Conclusion 3:** If I am OK with myself but I don't; trust you I will do whatever is necessary to get the job done and convince you that I trust you even when I don't. This archetype was termed **SURVIVALIST** by the researchers.
- **Conclusion 4:** If I don't feel good about myself, but I trust you I will show up at work and ask you to solve all my problems for me because I can't handle them. This archetype was termed **WHINGER** in the frame of reference.
- **Conclusion 5:** If I don't feel good about myself and I don't trust you I will exhibit all the characteristics of someone trapped in the relationship and trying to space from it. This archetype was termed **PRISONER** in the research.

From these conclusions it was easy to draw up a two by two matrix to plot the general perspective on the archetypes. This matrix resonates with almost everyone in Australian workplaces who see it:



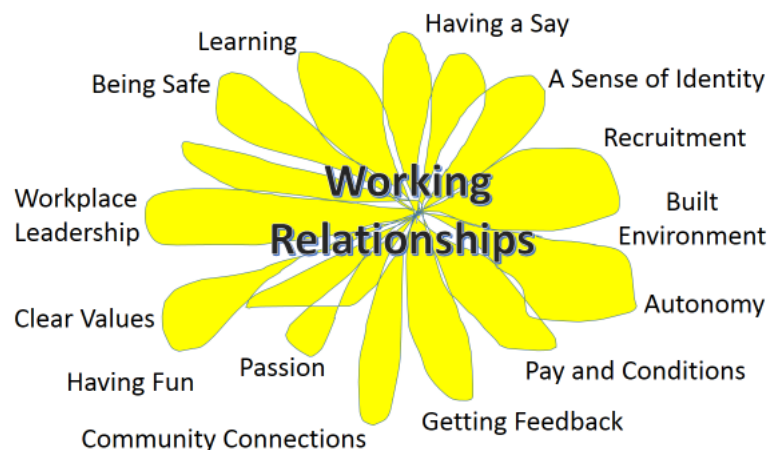
These four cultural archetypes underpin all Australian workplaces. The BCA research in 2003 then took the archetypes one step further by examining the difference between good and excellent workplaces drawn primarily from the **VOLUNTEER** quadrant.

Australian Archetype Study/Telstra/1990s



The research team in 2003 then visited selected workplaces nominated by the BCA across Australia and asked the people who worked there an open question: what is it in your opinion that makes your workplace the way it is?

It is important to note at this point that the study was never designed to compare and contrast **average** workplaces with **good** workplaces, or **poor** workplaces with **good** workplaces. The focus was on the difference between **good** workplaces and the **best** workplaces Australia had to offer. After the field visits, the responses were analysed to look for patterns of similarities and differences between and amongst all the workplaces. The following characteristics were seen to be key differentiators' between good and excellent workplaces.



1. BEING SAFE

Safety at work – and we mean real safety, not formal policies in a manual or days lost chalkboards – is based on mutual respect between people in a workplace. Feeling safe and secure comes from confidence, knowledge, training and particularly the experience of knowing that other people care for your wellbeing. In the excellent workplace there is a strong practical belief in all for one and one for all (Hull and Read 2003)

2. LEARNING

The bulk of learning took place on the job - it was startling to see the level of ad hoc and detailed learning that occurred at every site. The best sites were engaged in formal action learning programmes, whilst every site seemed to have informal groups talking and working together. There was no sense of a demarcation between learning and doing. (Hull and Read 2003)

3. HAVING A SAY

Excellent workplaces must be competent workplaces. Individuals seek out skills and they learn more about work processes. This means that they are confident to have a say about those processes. They did not want to have a say simply to exercise power, but rather to add value to the work. “Having a say” allows for individuals to have some autonomy in their own work processes. (Hull and Read 2003)

4. SENSE OF IDENTITY

We found that work teams and workplaces have developed their own identity, while acknowledging that they are part of a larger system. The results of our study have clearly demonstrated that diversity, uniqueness and autonomy can exist without placing the organisation at risk in any way. The values, purpose and outcomes of an organisation provide the glue and connection for building identification and cohesion, rather than prescriptive rules and regulations. (Hull and Read 2003)

5. RECRUITMENT

The right to hire and fire has traditionally been a core element of managerial prerogative but not necessarily in the excellent workplace. Once the initial recruitment screening was completed, in most of the workplaces we visited the final choice was left to fellow workers. Sometimes this was a formal panel interview, sometimes an informal meeting off site, and often a practical work situation in which other group members worked alongside the candidate in a problem solving exercise. We asked one group of workers if they had ever voted down a candidate. “Yes” was the reply. For what reasons we asked. “Because the bastards thought they had to convince the big boss and not us – we have to work with them, not the boss”. Failure to connect with the real recruiters was a fatal mistake. (Hull and Read 2003)

6. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

It is interesting to observe that in our excellent workplaces, the layout and fittings tend to reflect the way people go about their work. In the merely good workplaces, people tend to make do with what they have around them. In excellent workplaces, the spaces are redesigned around the people, their work and reflect their workplace aspirations. (Hull and Read 2003)

7. AUTONOMY

There is now increasing evidence from empirical studies that the relationship between high performance and autonomy is based on an employee's need for independence, individualism, innovation, information and incentives before they can perform to their potential. (Hull and Read 2003)

8. PAY AND CONDITIONS

In the excellent workplace money and conditions are seldom mentioned, principally because such matters are taken as read. When our field team asked about the reward for effort, people simply said 'well, there is the money, but we wouldn't be working here if the money was poor'. They then went on to point out that job satisfaction and working in a great workplace were equally important. The corollary to that statement is that if the money is poor, then the workplace is not excellent. Similarly, if there is continuing conflict over money and conditions the workplace will fail to qualify as well. In all our workplaces there was a general sense that a good employer and an excellent workplace ensure that wages and salaries are at least at industry standard. (Hull and Read 2003)

9. GETTING FEEDBACK

One of the areas of knowledge that they thirst for is knowledge about themselves – how am I going? But they also want to know how the company is going, how the production is going, how the rest of the team is going. We mentioned earlier the necessity of trust in building quality working relationships. We know that knowledge is power and what we have observed on the job is that management in excellent workplaces have clearly demonstrated their trust in their workforce by providing them with information and feedback that is rare in corporate Australia. (Hull and Read 2003)

10. COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

There is much research to indicate that the connection between the local community and an excellent workplace is one that creates business benefits. The result of our study complements that research, revealing that people in excellent workplaces want to engage with their local community because it is the 'right' thing to do. Business benefits are OK, but being a good neighbour comes first. (Hull and Read 2003)

11. PASSION

When people are passionate, getting volunteers is not the dilemma – it is choosing between those willing to be involved. Motivation leads to staying late, not fear of being sacked. Increasingly, employees are seeking to work for companies that express and activate a commitment to the broader community and society. Their work has wider meaning. (Hull and Read 2003)

12. HAVING FUN

There is no doubt that developing excellent workplaces is a serious business. Yet we consistently found that in the excellent workplace there was a relaxed environment that allowed work to be more than just pleasant. More research in the area might show that rather than being a central driver, having fun is a key marker for establishing excellence. One thing is very clear to us though – if the employees are not relaxed and do not have the ability to have some fun, then many of the other drivers will not be present either. (Hull and Read 2003)

13. CLEAR VALUES

In the best workplaces we visited, the values of the organisation were part of every aspect of the way business was done. These values also influenced the way people related to each other thereby in turn helping to generate the quality working relationships that we found to be the key to the entire equation. They also assisted in creating excellent relationships between staff and supervisors. It is quite impossible to isolate one of the factors – they cannot stand alone. (Hull and Read 2003)

14. WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP

Workplace leadership is a key factor in the underpinning of quality workplace relationships. In the excellent workplaces our team visited, leaders of all kinds and at all levels were aware of the impact that their behaviour has on the way people feel about the workplace and their job. They also know that their behaviour is critical in setting the example. There are a range of formal and informal processes and mechanisms where workplace leaders and other staff, in groups and individually, discussed matters and addressed challenges in ways that were supportive and encouraged learning. (Hull and Read 2003)

If there are any aspects of the 2003 study that remain controversial today they are the issues referred to in the 2003 study as the:

“POINTS OF INDIFFERENCE”

In the 2003 study, and only examining excellent workplaces, the researchers found that some of the perceptions held in the wider academic and industrial community concerning drivers of improved workplace productivity did not appear to be valid. They could not find evidence from their field work that supported the often hard held views about industrial relations, workplace demographics, technology or location.

The Points of Indifference are here re-stated:

Three categories of factors emerged in the study, which were not common to either good or excellent workplaces. These factors did not contribute directly to being excellent or otherwise, that is, being excellent does not require the presence – or absence of any of these factors.

Working arrangements and representation

This, for some, will be the most contentious of our findings.

Some of our excellent workplaces are strongly unionised, with a history of industrial conflict. Yet such workplaces have changed significantly and are now considered excellent, from both the business and work environment perspective.

It is our contention that the objectives of high performing workplaces are being achieved within the current industrial relations framework.

Other points of indifference in this category were:

- **Contracts of employment** - the workplaces had a variety of arrangements both collective and individual. One organisation was intending to move back to a collective arrangement after a period of using Australian Workplace Agreements.
- **Both union and non-union** workplaces are excellent and there were wide variations in the level of external union involvement. Some workplaces simply followed award provisions and therefore had little day-to-day involvement with unions in setting local terms and conditions of employment; others undertook extensive negotiations for enterprise agreements.
- The **hours of work** arrangements varied widely from casual to 12 hour rotating shifts. The employment of casual employees does not inhibit excellence nor contribute to it. It simply is not an issue.

Characteristics of the Business

There were both Greenfield and Brownfield workplaces in our study.

What became evident from the research was that this status did not tip the scales one way or the other in terms of being excellent or not.

- **The technology** varied significantly in complexity and sophistication, and work roles therefore demanded varying levels of skill and capability to deliver quality products and services.

It is not the technology that makes the difference. Not only can workplaces that would be categorised as belonging to a traditional industrial base be viewed as excellent, workplaces can deliver significantly different results when essentially using the same technology.

- **A particular geography, or location,** did not play a role in determining excellence.

We included excellent workplaces in metropolitan, regional and remote areas and across all states in the study. For some, geography was part of the strategy. In one instance an organisation deliberately chose to establish workplaces in satellite areas of major population centres based on the belief that offering good jobs where employment options were limited would increase the pool of employees to recruit from. Others, such as mining, construction and quarrying companies had their geographical locations predetermined.

- **Size of the workplace, size of the parent company, country of origin of the parent organisation,** and whether the workplace operated within a **public or private sector** environment were also not fundamental to excellence, although they played a role in strategy.

The research team were particularly interested to discover that the commonly held view of private sector organisations always being 'better' and 'more effective' than those in the public sector is now well open to challenge.

The composition of the workforce

The final group of points of indifference relate to the composition of the workforce, in terms of age, ethnicity or gender. Whilst some employers may have some human resources preferences that relate to concepts of equity or the satisfaction of statutory requirements, these factors had no direct bearing on the level of excellence. (Hull and Read 2003)

While no-one (including the BCA) said so publicly at the time, various vested interest groups found these findings of indifference challenging. Not because they saw them as empirically flawed, but because they went against long held views about the perceived nature of workplaces in Australia. The findings were privately criticised and dismissed by some employers and conservative commentators because the research did not conclude that individual contracts were superior to collective arrangements in excellent workplaces; and the research found that non-union excellent workplaces were not more productive than excellent unionised workplaces.

It was ironic that the study was also criticised by some trade unionists because it did not suggest that collective agreements and unionised high performing workplaces were more productive than non-unionised workplaces.

There were also those who did not accept that the best publicly owned and publicly managed workplaces could be as efficient as the best private workplaces. The view that “private is always better than public” remains deeply held as a belief by some vested interests.

Further, there were those who saw then (and still see in 2014) workforce diversity and gender equity in workforce participation as key drivers in workplace productivity. They were unhappy with the research findings that in the sample sites all male, all female as well as mixed gender workplaces all demonstrated excellence in every area of performance.

To misquote the wiser heads amongst us, it is though as the researchers “started a fight with everyone in the pub at once, and then they went to the pub next door and started a fight in there as well”! Unfortunately it was not possible for the researchers to avoid these fights, because at the end of day they were simply reporting what they saw in the field.

It should also be remembered that there are thousands, hundreds of thousands of average and below average poor performing workplaces in Australia. They cannot be directly compared with the few excellent workplaces examined in the 2003 research. In these many poor performing workplaces there may be a different set of assumptions to be made about the points of indifference. Different drivers may be in play to bring elements of justice, fairness and flexibility – and lift workplace productivity. Gender diversity, workforce flexibility, technology and location may in fact be critical in their world. The 2003 research did not ask or seek to ask questions about such workplaces.

WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP REMAINS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS

One aspect of the 2003 study that was accepted by everyone who read it but not explored in detail in the published ACIRRT Working Paper was the detailed typology of workforce leadership characteristics found in excellent workplace leaders, as described by the people in those workplaces:

In our workplaces, the staff valued highly those leaders who behaved as a captain/coach, which meant being available and providing support when needed but ‘not getting in the way’ when they were not. The expectations were that the leaders would choose their approach to suit the different needs of their staff, helping out when there was a crisis and allowing trial and learning when there was not. The research revealed that physical accessibility is a major factor, that supervisors in excellent workplaces often choose not to display the trappings of their position – an open plan office or even a desk on the factory floor often being preferred to the cosy suite upstairs. (Hull and Read 2003)

The characteristics of an excellent workplace leader in an excellent workplace were easy to identify from the records of the fieldwork. The workers interviewed were clear in their understanding of this issue. They had little difficulty in describing the best workplace leaders. Interestingly enough, the workforce also distinguished categorises of workplace leaders based on their past experiences. These categories aligned almost exactly with previous work undertaken during the TELSTRA study mentioned earlier (Industry Business Skills Council 2010).

Workers in Australia in the TELSTRA study and the 2003 BCA study tended to distinguish between three categories of workplace leaders in Australia: true leaders (few and far between), “bosses” (the majority of supervisors and managers) and “bastards” (a unique breed of first line manager). They agreed that there were two kinds of workplace bosses – good and bad – and while a good boss might become a true leader, a bad boss was more likely over time to become a bastard. Once the boss became a bastard, they remained a bastard forever!

Here is the overview of the typology of the best workplace leaders, as described in the 2003 study:



WORKPLACE LEADERS: FRONT LINE SUPERVISORS OR FIRST LINE LEADERS?

The 2003 study did not spend time looking at workplace leadership in detail. The primary focus was on workplaces as whole. There has been considerable work done in the area of workplaces leadership since the original study. However, the original findings appear to remain valid. It is useful to re-state those findings and update them.

1. For example **‘Walking the talk’** (acting in accordance with what has been said, implied, expected and promised) has become a common phrase in management theory and practice when discussing leadership qualities (Taylor 2005, Reilly 2005, Aitken 2007, Kessler 2010). It is shorthand for a set of leadership behaviours that are easily seen by the people on the job. It does not take a long time a leader’s actions to demonstrate their commitment to doing what they say they will do. Such qualities are valued in workplaces, especially when operational demands mean that the people on the job must rely on the words of the supervisor in order to successfully perform their own tasks.
2. The attribute of workplace leadership in Australia described as **“no bullshit”** (no lying or making up excuses, always being up front informative and sharing how it is, setting realistic goals) has not been specifically studied although it is seen by many as a common characteristic of good and bad leaders in the workplace. It is anecdotally held as a “known fact” that Australian workers have amongst the finest “bullshit detectors” in the world. Anyone who has worked for a living in an environment where advice, orders or instruction are given by workplace leaders knows that a healthy scepticism is an underpinning of Australian workplace culture.
3. **“No ambushes”** (not setting people up where there is a likelihood of failure) is drawn from a commonplace practice in some Australian workplace cultures where a supervisor will deliberately create a situation to draw a work colleague into making a decision that leads to their failure to perform; usually for the purpose of reinforcing personal control over them or reducing the status of the colleagues in the eyes of senior management. It is unfortunately all too common in middle and senior management ranks as well as amongst first line supervisors.
4. In recent studies the idea of leaders **“being honest”**, ethical, moral and providing information in a timely way and expressing humility at the same time is seen to have a positive correlation with ethical leadership (Ahmed et al 2010, De Vries 2012). The social and psychological dimensions of this aspect of workplace leadership are linked to personality and to what are described as “self-other” dimensions. In the Australian workplace context this aligns with the notion that working relationships (self-other) underpin excellence in workplaces.
5. An excellent workplace leader demonstrates an ability to anticipate a crisis, especially one that involves working relationships (Ayoko and Konrad 2012). This affirms the views of the 2003 best workplaces study (**“being there”**, showing empathy, providing genuine support to manage and resolve conflict) and opens up an interesting field of research which connects crisis management and workplace productivity.
6. The idea of a first line leader **“recognising a job well done”** (giving recognition and motivational encouragement liberally, frequently, and publicly) has been reaffirmed many times in studies unrelated to the original 2003 study (De Reyck and Degraeve 2010, Kets de Vries et al 2009). The role of the supervisor in awarding recognition rather than some impersonal missive from senior or middle management distinguishes the front line manager from generalised corporate acknowledgment. Recognition by the supervisor carries more weight than praise from senior ranks. It has a greater bearing on workplace productivity.

7. Being seen to be “**fair**” in dealings with the workplace employees was seen in the 2003 study to be an important element in supervisor-employee relationships (treating all around equally in every way, being realistic with goal expectations -- being transparent free from bias). This has been affirmed by studies since then (Van Knippenberg 2007)
8. “**Ethical**” dealing with employees (consistently acting in accordance with the rules or standards for right conduct or practice) has become a high profile topic in the last decade in Australian workplaces. Recent studies have made explicit what the 2003 study understood from interviews with best practice workplaces – setting ethical standards and being seen to act them out makes a positive difference in task orientation and builds good working relationships (Resick C J et al 2013 Keselman D 2012)
9. With respect to “**empowerment**” (allowing, encouraging and trusting others to exercise authority and make decisions) there have been many studies undertaken in this area since the 2003 study. An entire new employee engagement paradigm termed “employee voice” (Gollan and Wilkinson 2007) has been added to the established field of “employee participation” (Markey and Townsend 2013). There has also been a strong connection made between empowerment and the new management paradigm of “transformational leadership style” (Cohen 2013).
10. Another management framework for examining aspects of workplace leadership is what has become known as situational leadership (Avery and Ryan 2001). In this framework the excellent workplace leader will assess situations and apply facilitation skills as needed and “**not getting in the way**” (facilitating others to grow, make decisions and support, encourage and guide them in doing so) even though the task in front of them may look like a standard decision making exercise.
11. Perhaps the most vexed question in workplace leadership is the notion of how one “**builds trust**” between supervisors and employees (inspiring trust and confidence born of two dimensions: competence and character. Character includes integrity, motive, and intent with people). This is explored in a range of studies (Kacmar et al 2012), and links are shown between trust and the idea of “justice” at work (Lam et al 2013). This highlights the need for the trust to be underpinned by a strong task orientation by the supervisor (Sherwood and DePaolo 2005) as opposed to a personality attributed that links trust to the inherent good nature of the supervisor.
12. “**Being out there**” and taking risks on behalf of the team is a challenging task for any front line manager. It involves taking the initiative on behalf of the team, and making a demonstration to support the team, often at some personal risk in terms of status or professional standing for the supervisor.
13. Being “**accessible**” (being approachable at all times and available to share and provide information at any given time) is closely tied to ideas about approachability as a personal attribute amongst supervisors (Wrench et al 2007)

14. There are two kinds of coaches in sport – the kind that sits and stands on the sidelines and offer advice to players before they enter the field; and the “**captain/coach**” who is on the field with the rest of the team. In Australian workplace culture the captain/coach archetype is most respected (being “on the field” with the team and advising them from the workplace as part of the team, not in an office “far, far away”).

It should be noted that in the 2003 study as with subsequent follow up studies the primary focus on leadership attributes is that they are **task oriented**. That is, rather than underpinned by charismatic or personality traits, the workplace leader is seen by the team as someone who can do the job, is competent at the job and who is able to assist in getting the job done. This speaks to management training and coaching of workplace leaders – the focus has to be on developing individuals who are respected as skilled workers themselves. The idea that front line leaders can be “parachuted in” from other places with some generalised “management background” is seen not to hold in excellent Australian workplaces.

It implies further that front line management training requires more attention than previously thought (Hull D 2014). It is not sufficient to regard front line leaders as “supervisors with potential”. The position of leader in the best workplaces is the critical interface between the people who add value on a day to day basis and the managers who undertake more strategic actions.

It is odd that the latter category are usually more highly paid than the front line leaders, and often are sent to more prestigious and expensive management training programmes. Vocational courses for one group and post graduate executive (often overseas) courses for another. Yet both groups are equally vital to workplace and organisation productivity.

In the words of Lost in Space – “That does not compute”

CODA: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Having articulated the full suite of findings from the 2003 study, and raised some additional issues, there is an opportunity to take the research to the next level. At that point it should be possible to further affirm the 2003 findings and apply them to practical programmes for improving workplace productivity in Australia.

There are four complementary research pathways from here:

PATH 1

Revisit the Business Council of Australia study (Reprise the work)

The BCA may wish to repeat the 2003 study but this time to focus on drawing out from excellent workplaces the factors and actions that may be translated into programmes for government and the private sector to improve workplace productivity. This would add to an evidence based agenda for the BCA to advise government.

Likelihood of success

Given that the BCA did not publish the study at all, and the Working Paper was the window to the world for the research, and given that the BCA has never followed up the research team at all, it would require a completely new approach to a new BCA management and executive team.

However, given that the BCA has recently bought back into the area of workplace excellent and productivity, there may be a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. The question remains as to whether that glimmer of light is the end of the tunnel or the headlight of a train rushing towards the researchers. Hard to make out from this distance.

Conclusion: Wait and see, but stand to the side of the railway tracks.

PATH 2

Undertake action research (Undertake collaborative problem solving)

A small group of companies and agencies could join forces in a “club” not unlike the Senge MIT programme of the 1990s that resulted in the formation of the global “Society for Organisational Learning “. The plan would be to share ideas about excellent workplaces and swap success stories within the club on a confidential basis. This would provide competitive advantage in those sectors where workplace productivity makes a difference.

Likelihood of success

The Senge club was a success in its own right. It allowed companies to come together in confidential meetings, swap ideas about new management and organisation programmes, and support research into problems that they saw as critical to their business. The key was that the companies did not attempt to impose their own ideologies on the research teams, but allowed for new ideas to flourish, even the uncomfortable ones. Senge’s “Fifth Discipline” approach was revolutionary in the 1980s and 1990s in organisations around the world. It started with a few companies seeking competitive advantage, and finished as a new movement in management theory and practice.

It might be interesting to see if there are a dozen companies and public agencies with sufficient interest in re-examining their own workplaces and using the 2003 research as the basis for the work. It may be that the learning that comes from field work in this area could add significant value to the bottom line for the members of the “club”.

Conclusion: This has real potential.

PATH 3

Seek a government grant to pursue independent work in the field (Evidence based policy)

“Simply The Best Workplaces” to be taken up as the basis of a government sponsored consulting product under the umbrella the Commonwealth Department of Industry. It would be based on continuing academic work to enhance the findings of the 2003 study and create a suite of tools and techniques to be made available to the public and private sectors across Australia

Likelihood of success

Government is faced with a dilemma with respect to workplace productivity and workplace leadership. They are employers in their own right, and they have a mixed community of private employers, unions and lobby groups to contend with. Yet there is space in the policy development arena for a third party to offer evidence based research and findings to inform government. This is a new domain of research only insofar as it is less usual than internal departmental research, or reliance on advocacy based research from lobby groups (Hull et al 2013).

While there is every likelihood that field research undertaken on behalf of the government in this manner would enhance the quality and effectiveness of policies to support the evolution of excellent workplaces and workplace leadership in Australia, the chances of this happening in the foreseeable future are not great.

Conclusion: No harm in asking.

PATH 4

Gather more data from the field to affirm the 2003 findings, and extend the framework to include excellent workplace leadership as well as excellent working relationships

It is possible to develop a mobile application to allow people on the job to provide information about their own workplaces around the 14 attributes of excellent workplace relations and the 14 attributes of excellent workplace leadership. Such a data gathering exercise would be developed over time and launched in the community as a voluntary survey tool. While there are many variables involved in such an approach, it may provide valuable longitudinal datasets as people refresh their results over time. It may also identify candidate workplaces for closer study.

Likelihood of success

The development of a mobile application based on the 2030 study is a relatively easy task. Distribution of the survey in an attractive format is also relatively easy to build. Raising awareness of the application will require a social media strategy, combined with approaches to selected organisations to encourage them to use the application.

Conclusion: Possible and worth pursuing, but with a reasonable level of uncertainty around reach and acceptance of the application.

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