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Lifting barriers: Leadership, tactical, and strategic issues from, and for, indigenous community development

First Author:

Vikram Murthy

vikram@rimconsultants.co.nz

Second author:

Professor David McKie

dmckie@waikato.ac.nz

**Department of Management Communication
University of Waikato,
Hamilton
New Zealand**

Abstract

This paper uses learnings from a project with indigenous youth to engage with a recurring challenge in indigenous community organisation (ICO) development initiatives: The unwitting detraction from outcome efficacy by charismatic and influential indigenous leadership leading with an out-of-date repertoire. Using material from recent literature in the fields of non-profit management, new leadership, and social enterprise, the paper suggests guides to improved practice for meeting this challenge. It also sets out to

establish the value of a more appropriate leadership repertoire, which, without impeding effectiveness, will better underwrite sensitivity in entrepreneurial environments with complex cultural and social beliefs and practices. Such a repertoire will energise intra-organisational communal and consensual processes, which would resonate culturally with the ICO's normative behaviours and values, and would thus help the organisation marshal its collective will to frame futures that best capture their stakeholders' hopes and aspirations.

Finally, it recommends that future research examine interfaces between these fields and the spiritual frameworks of indigenous world-views.¹

Introduction

The indigenous youth help desk was designed as a culturally appropriate intervention which encapsulated the philosophy, processes, and action plans that work for the unique realities of urban indigenous people. It was a holistic, community networks-enabled model that engaged young, at-risk, indigenous people through an ongoing process of building life skills, creating education pathways, instilling employment readiness, and where appropriate, energising entrepreneurial acumen to enable them take their rightful place alongside the rest of the country's youth. It counted any one of multiple outcomes: re-introduction to the educational system; labour market re-entry; and/or enterprise creation, as an acceptable measure of its success.

As a case study the indigenous youth help desk project suggests imperatives for aligning tactics and strategy. One such imperative is a fresh leadership repertoire for ICO's that incorporates such concepts from new leadership research as: Mintzberg's (2004) framework for balancing the art, craft and science of management and leadership; Bennis and Thomas's (2002) crucible model of leadership development; and Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee's (2002) mindfulness. This paper suggests using spirituality which lies at the core of the indigenous people's world view, to operationalise these concepts. It further concludes that such interfaces between spiritual frameworks of indigenous world views and newer research on leadership, and non-profit social entrepreneurship, are rich areas for future research.

The project framework

The outsourced framework was designed to connect to indigenous people's world view in every aspect from conception to delivery. There were four distinct milestone stages in the program delivery: an initial motivational phase (rooted in indigenous spirituality and wisdom), which built strength, self-confidence and readiness in the participants to step up to the plate and engage with the program proper; secondly, a bridging phase, where participants were provided life skills training customized to their individual needs, with content carefully vetted for relevance to the urban indigenous participants (and wherever possible relevant to, and credentialed in, both indigenous and mainstream worlds); thirdly, a learning phase, where participants joined an education and training regime,

¹ Names, locations, acronyms etc. have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants and participating organisations.

which provided them with transportable skills and pathways to further education, entrepreneurship, or meaningful work; and finally, the last phase, where participants were actively assisted by the program managers who, based on the participants' commitment and confidence, staircased them into vocational training/tertiary education, gainful employment (through a program of job planning and work placement), or entrepreneurship.

The help desk provided phone counselling, 24 x 7 support through an interactive, database-driven website, face to face counselling and individual, capacity building (life skills, education pathways, employment and enterprise incubation) for young, at-risk indigenous people. The project implemented the following pillars of an "indigenous people youth help desk" model: a youth support help line; a virtual help desk; a youth counselling-mentoring desk; a youth social-mentoring desk; and a youth activities desk. These were delivered in three phases: firstly, project planning; secondly, course materials development, web site launch, and the commencement of basic computer familiarisation courses; and thirdly, the actual delivery and compliance reporting of the pilot help desk services.

Project scope, deliverables, and outcomes

During the course of its operation the pilot project pioneered a unique services model. It established a prototype that could be replicated across the region through other indigenous people service providers and with other youth cohorts. A total of sixteen "at risk" indigenous youth participated in the pilot project. Eight of them achieved outcomes by advancing into full time employment, returning to secondary school, and/or enrolling in a tertiary training programme. While individual personal triumphs were evident, the overwhelming collateral benefits to community safety were incalculable. The IT resources for the help desk proved to be a valuable connecting, content-providing, confidence-building, and community-growing tool for the participating youth. In addition, IT facilities at the indigenous community centre were significantly enhanced with the establishment of a networked community computer learning and training centre. This ICT infrastructure blueprint, the indigenous help desk online learning resources, and the website all became leverageable assets to enable the mainstreaming of this pilot across other ICOs and geographies.

Reflecting on strategic failures

On the strength of the outcomes achieved, and the positive feedback from participants, the government would normally have made further grant funding available to roll out the help desk concept to additional sites. This did not happen in this instance because the ICO was found wanting in key areas of project leadership, involved management, and organisational capacity and capabilities.

On the surface, the government had probably met adequate oversight requirements: it had evaluated and endorsed a new and exciting pilot for engaging with young indigenous people; it had awarded the contract to an ICO of perceived public stature (while

protecting itself, and public funds, with risk management strictures); it had taken credit for the successful outcomes resulting from the pilot stage; and it had suspended the second stage of the program because its program oversight managers had found the organisation wanting in capability and capacity to take the project forward. At a deeper level of analysis, however, other young indigenous people at risk would end up being the real losers. A successful prototype, which had demonstrated the ability to build efficacy, remained restricted to the small number of participants in the pilot leaving the larger community unchanged.

Eschewing a dated repertoire

The problems go much beyond the individual result, however. The discontinuance of the indigenous youth help desk project is symptomatic of more deep-rooted leadership issues in indigenous enterprise. This paper suggests that these issues maybe tackled through the construction of an up-to-date indigenous-relevant repertoire. It argues that existing practices are out of step with the times and government initiatives (see Department of Labour, n.d.; *Developing assets*, n.d.; *Developing enterprise*, n.d.; *Developing people*, n.d.).

They also fail to capitalise on the potential for synergy between age-old indigenous spiritual wisdom and new leadership research. For example, the downside of charismatic and influential leadership has been identified in mainstream business organisations (see Collins, 2001a; 2001b). This is less well known in the indigenous environment, where the traditional genealogical model, often with actual kingships, actually amplified this failure. One person became invested with inordinate amounts of formal influence and power. Tribal protocol enshrined this influence and power because of culturally accepted power-distance. Yet the environment has changed significantly over time. Tribal and urban indigenous organisations are now multi-million dollar operations, which deliver services, manage assets, and so on. Certain traditional leadership roles, such as the importance of the chief having the final say in just about every area of tribal life, are less appropriate. Tribal and urban indigenous affairs have become too complex and so no one person is likely to have the gifts, the backing, or the time, to cover all the bases. This paper supports Diamond's (2003) findings that more team-based leadership is a prerequisite of modernisation. The possible downstream losses of the cancelled project extension in this case, for example, underline the short-term and long-term penalties for any organisation that chooses to ignore such reforms.

It is ironic that another downside of "great man" or "heroic" leadership, (which has also been under attack in the mainstream for at least a decade), focuses on their difficulties with sustaining change management programs (see Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Roth, & Smith, 1999). This is a paradoxical problem in the indigenous context. In this case, for example, on the one hand, as a representative of a minority community that was disproportionately represented in all the negative social statistics, the leader of the community services organisation had to be a very visible and high-profile social entrepreneur able to initiate change. He accomplished this with significant personal credibility and charisma and was able to tap into critical but contestable government

resources. It also enabled him to build the necessary coalition of acquiescent participants to provide his organisation with the critical mass to impact on negotiations.

On the other hand in this role, a larger-than-life persona can also generate serious negative ramifications for the organisation itself (Waddock & Post, 1991, p. 395) including perhaps; inadvertent authoritarianism, imbalance in the leader's degree of control within the organisation, and a perceptible class structure within the board because of the leader's professional and personal standing in the community. These may all have contributed to the leader inherently holding privileges and power beyond those held by any other member of the board (Block & Rosenberg, 2002, pp. 353-354). Diversity of management opinion and creative dissension, which are both vital to healthy organisations (Nemeth, 1997), and the ability to delegate with sufficient responsibility to sustain changes, may suffer as a consequence.

Prabhu (1999) also points to role conflicts that founder-leaders face between their organisational and their personal roles and how they can contribute to further organisational dysfunction. This paper argues that an indigenous organisation is already susceptible to these problems, because of its strong roots in genealogy (and the associated barriers of power-distance), and, moreover, that the strength and assertiveness of the leader may have compounded these conflicts in this particular case. There was a clear strategic failure in this case because, despite the positive outcomes that the pilot project returned on all measurement matrices (and in addressing unexpected crises), and in its execution, the failure to award a full-blown contract has to be tied directly to the leadership.

The leader's observable personal interest/disinterest in, or pre-occupation/apathy with, specific projects, combined with his role as founder, resulted in uncalibrated growth, and/or decay, of projects. These aspects combined with the owner's lack of managerial expertise served to exacerbate an already difficult situation. It was logical that in such a configuration, major organisational imperatives, which were not of personal interest to the leader, remained undone, and the hard work of seeing change through and embedding it in the organisation unlikely to attract sufficient management energy. In this case, the design and implementation of robust systems and processes, the creation of high quality managerial capacity and capability, and the active attention to succession planning, had all taken a back-seat for over twenty years.

Crafting an enlightened repertoire

Having identified the problems with indigenous leadership, this paper will identify possible solutions in new leadership research. One strong possibility lies in a strategic fit between challenges facing ICO enterprises, and models and practices emerging from recent work by Mintzberg and new leadership literature. Mintzberg's (2004) framework for managing in balance can usefully guide ICOs through its emphases on keeping facts, creative insights, and practical experiences in dynamic balance (Mintzberg, 2004, p. 93). This approach does not throw out the good with the bad, or neglect value in the already existing positives but integrates experience and wisdom, and encourages opportunity seeking and bold-stroke visioning. It avoids blaming (and therefore, often, loss of face), while still advocating dynamic learning in the form of facilitated and mentored actions.

This paper posits that such a framework suits an ICO, which is willing to accept the harshness of its current realities while still attempting to escape a deficit model stereotype by moving to an opportunities paradigm.

In making the above connection, this paper acknowledges the contextual difficulties of indigenous leadership, where success has always been won after significant battles against overwhelming odds. More importantly the struggle for parity and the movement to succeed as a people is a perpetual work in progress. However, this paper also argues that special efforts must be made, if such achievement is not to be lost through an outmoded role model of the leader as “a heroic figure, needed especially in times of crisis, appearing just in time to save the day” (Parks, 2005, p. 202). Such reliance breeds a dependence on last minute rescues and leaves ICOs without long-term systemic solutions to endemic problems of poor investments, hollow organisational capacity, indifferent quality governance, and weak management controls.

Accordingly, the paper recommends supplementing Mintzberg’s (2004) managing in balance framework with specific leadership development. One potential cornerstone, which moves away from heroic leadership notions, is Bennis and Thomas’s (2002) model, which is designed to be “applicable in every culture and context” (p. 122). It sets out the four essential competencies of authentic leadership as: adaptive capacity; the ability to engage others through shared meaning; a distinctive voice; and integrity. In addition, Bennis and Thomas (2002) spotlight the need for a defining experience, which they term the crucible, to shape and enable such leadership’s emergence and growth. This paper finds their model apt and culturally appropriate for indigenous organisations, where authentic leadership can be foregrounded through the struggle for social and political equity (their defining experience or crucible).

This paper further recommends two other emerging strands in the leadership literature as being of specific relevance to indigenous issues. They are connected, but one focuses more on spirituality in leadership, and the other on emotions. In the first, without mentioning the word spirituality, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2004) present “a framework of organisational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected in a way that provides feelings of compassion and joy” (p. 13). Sfeir Younis (2002) further strengthens this vision of spiritual leadership, as a profound commitment to ethics in the treatment of others, the linkage of the organisation to the idea of self-realisation, and constant reflection on the contribution of the organisation to society. Such a focus has the ability to imbue the organisation with a *raison d’être* that is rooted in community. In a manner compatible with traditional beliefs, this greater organisational purpose could counter the low morale frequently observed in ICOs.

The second strand, resonant leadership research, urges organisational and personal mindfulness as the basis of enlightened longevity. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) capture the nexus between an individual’s spirit, emotion and intelligence well when they define personal mindfulness as:

The capacity to be fully aware of all that one experiences *inside the self* – body, mind, heart spirit – and to pay full attention to what is happening *around us* – people, the natural world, our surroundings and events Living mindfully means that we are constantly and consciously in tune with ourselves – listening carefully to our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. (p. 112)

There is much indigenous writing and experience able to resonate with that kind of language and sentiment. It has also been found to be highly effective in crisis situations. Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) description of mindfulness in high response organisations, such as firefighting teams, captures its organisational manifestation: "These [mindful] processes encourage people to be self-conscious about the validity of their beliefs and to question them, re-affirm them, update them, replace them, and learn from all these activities" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 3).

These complementary concepts of spirituality in leadership and individual and organisational mindfulness enable leaders to better understand and appropriately leverage indigenous spiritual world views for personal and organisational effectiveness. They build on traditional indigenous views of individual and collective well-being and harmony on a continuum that stretches from the one extremity of spiritual blindness, to the other extreme of well being and wellness (where both the individual and the collective are in spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional balance). In such a state the individual is enraptured, enamoured, and in awe of life. In effect the corporate dream of wholehearted employee engagement enhanced by conscious connections with the spirit of ancestors. To be effective in operating with this world view, indigenous leadership needs to leverage multiple cultural constructs to drive transformative practices in organisations.

Discussion

This was a preliminary attempt to define an updated leadership repertoire for ICOs and to predicate reasons for its efficacy in practice. The challenge has been to extrapolate experiential observations and learning from one ICO case study capable of generalisability in for a range of indigenous organisations across different countries and embedded in different contexts. Despite the degree of difficulty being compounded by the need to preserve anonymity, the case indicates deficiencies that can be strategically matched with emerging concepts from contemporary research to prepare for the kind of challenges and opportunities that indigenous people and their organisations must meet now and in the future. The paper also indicates advantages that could accrue by interfacing indigenous spiritual world-views with new leadership ideas on balance, authenticity, spirituality, and mindfulness.

Strengths and limitations

One of the strengths of this study is that it has pivoted itself off a case study so that the collection of qualitative information has been based on experiential learning where the ICO's actions have been reviewed and used to draw conclusions and then to craft a plan

for updating repertoires. Because the case study has involved an ICO, it has enabled this paper to straddle both mainstream and indigenous worlds. It has become a truism that learning is a social process and requires mobilising social dimensions of learning process. The new framework has been constructed to build on the cultural resources and experiences of the project participants and their community. In particular, it foregrounds the strand of spirituality that is integral to the indigenous world view and the possibilities of interfacing it with contemporary mainstream interpretations of mindfulness.

Because of the need to protect anonymity, the empirical evidence of leadership failure is restricted. However the intention of pivoting the paper on the case is less to illustrate an individual failure than to highlight an example of a common situation. The authors have experience of similar leadership issues in other ICOs with whom they have worked and invite further research from international indigenous organisations that will provide confirmation or refutation. In addition the aim of providing an exemplar case influenced the focus on limited possible causes of organisational non-performance: a dated leadership repertoire and the resulting organisational dysfunction. Forging an updated leadership repertoire is a commendable strategic intervention that should yield significant dividends in service effectiveness. It must however be viewed at all times as a key part of a holistic framework of analysis that must examine such other causes of organisational ineffectiveness in this landscape as the strategic engagement template that government and bureaucracies use in their interaction with, and management of funded projects; and the governance and management shortcomings in ICO delivery organisations that sometimes adversely impact their overall development.

Directions for future research

Further research would design specific interventions and run an action research programme (see Eden & Huxham, 1996) to test their workability in the field and to develop the participants and embed the new learning by working toward successful outcomes. From such a pilot study, the interventions could then be tested across culture and countries and be compared and contrasted with mainstream leadership research findings to the possible enrichment of both.

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