SOLR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contemporary Challenges and Implications for Leaders in Frontline Human Service Organisations

Research Report
February 2003
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The Service Organisation Leadership Research (SOLR) Project investigated the challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by leaders in a selection of frontline human service organisations and the ways in which such leaders were responding to these pressures. The research findings indicate a need for a reinterpretation of leadership thinking and practices that requires a change in systemic thinking and attitudes, particularly in the formation of authentic leaders and the building of cultures of leadership in service organisations.

Participants in the Research (Industry Partners)

- Australian Catholic University (ACU National)
- Industry Partners:
  - NSW Police;
  - NSW Department of Education and Training;
  - Catholic Education Office, Parramatta; and
  - Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI).

Funding

The project was funded by the four Industry Partners (IPs) and the Australian Research Council through the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs’ Strategic Partnerships with Industry – Research and Training Scheme (SPIRT).

Development of the Project

In the development stages of the Project, representatives of the partner organisations, as co-researchers, together with researchers from ACU National, formulated the initial research questions by drawing on their combined expertise, experience and insight into the challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by leaders that were perceived to be part of daily organisational life. A rigorous, iterative process resulted in the following major research questions being proposed:

1. What are the contemporary challenges for leaders in frontline human service organisations?
2. How are leaders responding to these challenges?
3. What are the ethical dilemmas and underlying values involved in making these responses?
4. How are these challenges impacting on contemporary leadership practice?

5. How can industry partners use the findings to improve leadership training and development in their organisations?

The Methodology

The co-researchers from the partner organisations were keen to be actively involved in a research project that focused on contemporary challenges and ethical dilemmas for leaders. Such a complex study required a methodology that was comprehensive in scope, yet sufficiently focused and integrated to generate a coherent view of contemporary leadership challenges, dilemmas and practices.

Leadership involves complex influencing processes within dynamic organisational contexts. In order to study both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the research questions, it was decided to include leaders from executive level, middle level and the frontline across the four organisations involved in the study. It was also decided to use a variety of data collection techniques within both the quantitative and qualitative traditions of research to assist in capturing both the generic aspects and the variability of leadership.

The study incorporated four complementary data collection stages, namely, questionnaire, interviews, critical leadership incident, and electronic dialogue involving a customised, interactive website.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed to ‘map’ the research area. It was designed to explore the main dimensions of the research questions with a stratified sample of frontline, middle and senior/executive leaders. The questionnaire, using a 6-point likert scale, was piloted and revised accordingly. Three thousand questionnaires were distributed through the Industry Partner organisations with a 42 percent response rate.

The findings from the questionnaire were used to identify key concepts related to the research questions and also to help formulate the questions for the interviews. Also included in the questionnaire was an invitation to participants to be involved in subsequent stages of the research. Five hundred and thirty five respondents indicated their preparedness to continue their involvement with further stages of the
SOLR Project. The questionnaire findings were used to generate the questions for the interviews.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a selection of leaders who had volunteered to be interviewed. The interview questions were developed and piloted with a small number of key personnel within the Industry Partners. In order to ensure consistency in interviewing, all interviewers attended a training day.

Interviews were generally 30 minutes in length, semi-structured and conducted either face-to-face or by telephone. One hundred and five interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed.

Critical Incident Technique

Three hundred participants indicated their willingness to complete a ‘Critical Leadership Incident’. Participants were asked to describe one incident where they, as leaders, were forced to make a difficult ethical choice. They were then requested to briefly recount (1) what happened, (2) the dynamics and processes involved, (3) the choices they made, and (4) the lessons they learned. This recounting was guided by 6 stimulus questions that were piloted and refined. One hundred and fifty five Critical Incidents were returned.

The Interactive Website

A customized, interactive website constituted an important data gathering, concept validation, and theory building technique. Its effectiveness was greatly enhanced by the fact that all of the participants were experienced leaders who could be regarded as reflective practitioners and researchers.

The five hundred and thirty five respondents who indicated their interest in the SOLR project in the questionnaire phase were invited by letter and email to join a three-week, on-line research dialogue on leadership. This moderated web site was designed to focus on ‘Discussion Topics’, which were identified from the findings of the questionnaire, critical incident technique, interviews and emerging data on the website. Examples of discussion topics included: risk taking, expectations of leaders, lopping off dead wood, and fear in organisations.
Data Analysis

NVivo, a computer analysis software package, primarily, for qualitative data, was used to assist with the analysis of the large volume of data generated by the interviews, critical incident technique, and interactive website. It proved to be a powerful integrating tool that greatly assisted in the generation of concepts and theoretical propositions from the data across the four organisations. It was especially useful for the organisation and analysis of the data generated through the website.

Data generated through the website were continually processed, analysed and presented back electronically to participants in the form of emerging themes and concepts (theoretical sampling). This iterative process helped ensure that the emerging concepts fitted with the real world, were relevant to the people involved in the research, and worked across the range of organisational contexts.

The interweaving of data and theory was promoted by the memo function of NVivo. The function allows researchers to record their expressions, feelings and interpretation of emerging patterns in the data. The memos, when used together, provide an evolving account of the researchers’ attempts to make sense from the complexity of the data.

CHALLENGES AS TENSIONS

Many of the challenges facing leaders present themselves as complex tensions involving a contestation of values and/or ethical dilemmas or tensions. A number of the dilemmas could be categorized as presenting tensions between the following seemingly opposite value positions.

Common Good and Individual Rights

This was one of the most frequently discussed tensions. This is a situation where the decision involves a choice between what is right and appropriate for the individual and that which is right and appropriate for the group. Some general conclusions from the SOLR project on this tension are:
1. The actual decision of whether to rule for either individual or community is governed by a number of mitigating circumstances and there appears to be no apparent trend towards individual or community;
2. Conciliatory measures are usually undertaken in order to cater for the individual;
3. Leaders concluded in hindsight that it is better to deal with a situation sooner rather than later. Putting off difficult steps in a process of decision making does not make the difficulties disappear;
4. Sometimes, there needs to be a clinical approach to situations. Compassionate leadership should be the norm but, sometimes, a less soft approach is the best;
5. When the going gets difficult and you know you’re right, you need to stick with your decision;
6. Always be guided when making ethical decisions by what you believe is ‘right’ and ‘good; and
7. At the end of the day you need to own the decision and be able to give sound reasons for it.

*Care and Rules*

Leaders in all the SOLR organisations continually face challenges and decisions that can involve tensions between a concern for either ‘care’ or ‘rules’. Care encompasses compassion, looking at the individual circumstance and making a decision that puts care and concern for the individual above all rules and policies. Rules or policies provide guidelines for leaders on how to make decisions. Some respondents in this study argue that, by complying with rules, they are also fulfilling their duty of care to the community and, therefore, do not recognise any real tensions in this area.

When leaders enforce the rules, they appear to be mindful of the litigious nature of society. Some respondents, however, tended to emphasise care over rules where the decision guidelines were not mandatory. Rules were suspended when leaders considered that a care outcome was a ‘better’ solution to the tension.

*Loyalty and Honesty/Justice*

Loyalty is defined as being committed to either the organisation, the person in charge, or colleagues. Loyalty can constitute allegiance to individuals, groups or to the vision and mission of the organisation. Honesty is where one speaks truthfully about any person, issue or situation and does not intentionally deceive or mislead. Justice in the context of the SOLR project is interpreted as making decisions that are fair to all.
Tensions were experienced in a variety of situations:

1. Balancing the acknowledgment of those who are reaching retirement age with compassion and recognition for long and loyal service;
2. Making provision for older personnel to retire with dignity even though their current performance is not up to standard; and
3. Students raising ethical issues about work they were asked to do for a teacher even though they liked her, and were trying to be loyal to her.

*Rhetoric and Reality*

Effective leadership implies connection to deeply held values or underlying principles. Tensions sometimes arise between the rhetoric based on values and the actual lived experiences of organizational members. The following comment by a Principal makes the point very well:

the rhetoric of leaders in many organisations is not reflected in their daily behaviours and interactions. As a result, too many people in the workplace are cynical about leaders and leadership. Leaders, frequently, lack credibility in the eyes of those who work with them because these leaders do not 'walk the talk'.

*Service and Economic Rationalism*

This tension highlights those instances where respondents believed that the imperatives of economic rationalism such as: efficiency as a core value; increased accountability; use of redundancy to reduce costs; and restructuring, (e.g. merging of organisational structures) had a negative impact on their core business which they believed to be the provision of a high quality, caring service to all clients.

There was a strong view among the leaders in the SOLR Project that, despite budget restrictions and economic imperatives, it is always possible to exercise care and concern for those with whom you work. A recommendation was to be fair in relationships and provide others with the reasons why you decided the way you did. Honesty, it appears, is the best policy when dealing with such tensions, according to the respondents in the SOLR study.

*Status Quo and Development*

Maintaining the *status quo* is about avoiding and resisting change while development or growth implies embracing changes. The tension of coping with the pressures for change and the need to maintain existing cultures are identified as generic tensions across the organisations in the SOLR project.
Long-Term and Short-Term Perspective

Any leadership decision may have possible long-term and/or short-term consequences. For example, it may be in the short-term interests of an organisation to make a number of staff redundant in order to save money or be more efficient. It may, however, work against the long-term interest of the organisation in as much as the morale of staff declines and important expertise is let go.

Leaders in the SOLR Project were asked what lessons they had learned when attempting to resolve such dilemmas and tensions. Most claimed that you have to be true to yourself and live your values. You have to live with yourself at the end of the day. They also advised that honesty and openness, when deciding on such tensions, is always the best policy. Deceptiveness and playing politics are not recommended.

Suggested Guidelines for Making Decisions in Tension Situations

The following guidelines for making decisions in tension situations are derived from the respondents in the SOLR study.

1. Decisions will be different depending on the persons involved and the mitigating circumstances.
2. Welfare of the organisation may necessitate tough top-down decision-making. This type of leadership means that good does not always come from getting consensus first.
3. The easy option is to do nothing. As the leader you must speak up against injustice. The leader is duty bound to follow the ethical and moral course of action.
4. There are no simplistic and easy answers when dealing with people.
5. It is easier to ignore or arrange for the transfer of ineffective staff, than to try to dismiss them. However, the consensus from the SOLR project is that the leader should ‘bite the bullet’ and tackle the problem of the inefficient staff member sooner rather than later.
6. Leaders can speak all the right language but, in times of stress, may practice entirely different principles.
7. It is important to trust the basic ‘goodness’ of people.
8. It is usually better to approach a tension situation with a both/and rather than with an either/or mindset. Often it is not a matter of the individual versus the group or common good or loyalty versus honesty, but consideration should be given in decision making to the individual and the common good as well as to honesty and loyalty.
Preparing Future Leaders

Vision and Realisation
An implication, which arises from this discussion, is that it is clearly desirable for leaders at all levels of frontline organisations to feel empowered to contribute to the determination and realisation of the visions which are to guide their organisations and the strategies which they and their staffs will be expected to implement.

Accountability
While there appears to be a general acceptance that accountability in this day and age of rising expectations and diminishing resources is essential and unavoidable, there is a fear that if blame must be apportioned then compliance and even deviance will replace collaboration and affirmation. The implication is that trust cannot exist where staff feel overwhelmed by unreasonable or unexplained expectations.

Staff Relations and People Management
A finding in the study is that frontline leaders will often need to walk a fine line between contradictory demands from a variety of beneficiaries among whose numbers they, at times, may count themselves. Of course, morale and motivation, which ebb and flow without apparent immediate cause, can be directly related to administrative processes such as selection, promotion, supervision and dismissal, whereby external relations and decision making can overflow to the workplace itself. Leaders who bring people together, who establish strong professional and at times personal relationships with colleagues, clients and partners, who are intelligently confident, and who are able to empower others (rather than exercise power) are those who are most likely to be best equipped to handle the staff relations and people management tasks so central to frontline organisations.

Balancing Demands, Expectations, Roles and Responsibilities
What is implied here is that the first responsibility of frontline leaders must surely be to the clients, that is to the students, parents, congregations and law-abiding members of the public. The interests of disaffected individuals are, in most instances,
best protected by careful planning, staff development, sensitive change management practices and by re-orientating dysfunctional cultures. It may be that the difficulties reported by the respondents in balancing quality of life and work may have adverse effects on application rates for promotion; levels of absence through sickness and stress; resignation rates; morale, motivation, teamwork and effective relationships. If this is the case, then a significant implication for employers will be to accept that the careful selection and development of leaders is crucial to the health of their organisations. It follows that the identification of potential leaders, their preparation and ongoing nurturing and support should be a high priority in education, the religious institutes, and the Police.

Leaders or potential leaders in these circumstances cannot go unprepared or unsupported. It is evident that their employers, the institutions that train them and the professional organisations of which frontline leaders are often members, have a compelling responsibility to prepare, develop and support frontline leaders during all phases of their careers.

**Building a Culture of Leadership in Service Organisations**

The challenges facing leaders, as identified in the SOLR Project, are complex and multidimensional. There is a need for change so that individuals take responsibility for leadership at all levels and organisations involve people more in the policies/decisions they have to implement. This requires a change in mindsets, attitudes, practices and preparation for leadership.

Leaders in contemporary organisations also require frames of reference that can assist them manage situations of uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox. They need frameworks for making choices that can encompass seemingly polar opposite considerations, values and ethical positions. This perspective is not always well accepted, never mind understood or appreciated, by a majority of those who study and practice leadership and management.
COMPLEXITY: LEADERS DEALING WITH TENSIONS

Often, leaders in service organisations think and act in paradoxical situations in terms of right-and-wrong, either/or mindsets. Many of the challenges, however, identified by leaders in the SOLR project present themselves as tensions where choices are often between right-and-right, rather than right-or-wrong alternatives. Finding optimal resolutions to such tension situations demands mindsets and approaches based on both/and rather than either/or thinking and acting.

English (1995) prefers to regard paradox as a tension situation that is, primarily, characterised by relationship and complementarity rather than polar opposites. He recommends that leaders and managers should analyse paradox and dilemma situations, not in terms of contradiction, polarity, and either/or frames but in terms of a relationship that encompasses both competition and complementarity. They should, he says, determine, as best they can, the qualities and conditions of relationships in each situation. In this way leaders can better understand and manage a change.

A tension situation, says English (1995), can then best be described as a double-headed arrow. Seeming polar-opposites are actually in a complex relationship and influences are rarely one-way. Instead of being mutually exclusive, most seeming opposites are ‘in tension’, characterised, partly, by competition and, partly, by complementarity.

By emphasising the relationship and complementarity instead of the seeming contradictions and opposites, English argues that leaders and managers have a better chance of influencing the direction and intensity of the positive side of the tension. Otherwise, they will opt for the either/or approach, perhaps believing that seeming opposing forces are mutually exclusive and incompatible, thereby creating a win-lose situation. (For an example of the application of the concept of the double-headed arrow to a tension situation often faced by leaders, please see Chapter 9, p. 133, in the main report).

Leaders who have to make judgments in complex, dilemma situations need preparation and formation that involve competency training but they also require a broader framework and capabilities for action (beyond competencies) as well as specific leadership attributes.
BEYOND COMPETENCIES

Leaders who have to make choices in tension situations, require more than management skills and competencies. They require creative, intuitive frameworks based on in-depth understanding of the nature of human nature and of the values, ethics, and moral dimensions inherent in human interaction and choice. Above all, they need sound judgment and a wisdom derived from critical reflection on the meaning of life and work. They have to be people with heart who are emotionally mature enough to develop mutually elevating and productive relationships. The ability of leaders to establish and nurture effective relationships within their organisations, possibly, transcends any other capabilities leaders should possess.

The tensions inherent in the leadership challenges identified in the SOLR Project, call for qualities, mindsets and dispositions that help leaders form creative frameworks for choice and action. It is suggested that effective leaders require a number of attributes when dealing with complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity in contemporary organisations. These include being:

1. critically reflective. This is the capacity to critically reflect on the challenges and experiences of life and work. It constitutes a habit of reflecting critically on our values, viewpoints and taken-for-granted assumptions, as well as on our actions and interactions. Its primary purpose is self growth and improvement;

2. intuitively connected. This is the ability to tap into the wisdom distilled from the warp and weft of life’s experiences. Too frequently, intuition is dismissed as ‘soft’ logic or ‘gut feelings’. On the contrary, intuition constitutes the fund of wisdom accumulated through the ‘school of hard knocks’ as we sift and sort through our experiential learnings for guiding principles and benchmarked practices (these have stood the test of past challenges);

3. ethically responsible. This refers to our capability in applying ethical standards to complex and perplexing value-tense situations. When we are ethically responsible, we are usually acting as thoughtful, caring human beings, and not as self-serving, narcissists;
4. *spiritually courageous*. Authentic leaders are depthed human beings who have struggled with the meaning of life and have spiritual scars on their characters from agonising over what is the ‘right’ thing to do when the ethical path may be fuzzy or grey;

5. *intellectually capable*. Leadership demands a high level of mental acuity and discernment. Leaders need disciplined minds and must be knowledgeable and rigorous in their method of analysis and reasoning;

6. *professionally committed*. Leaders require a deep commitment to their chosen profession. They must believe in what they are doing and serve their ‘clients’ or ‘customers’ with professional competence and commitment;

7. *managerially competent*. Leaders need to have knowledge, understanding, and skills in managing complex organisations. These are competencies that relate to effective management of organisations and must be present in the leader or leadership team;

8. *strategically ready*. Leaders need to be aware of ‘the big picture’; they need to be visionary, strategic thinkers. In a world of uncertainty and constant change, they must be ready (through critical reflection and learning) for the unexpected;

9. *emotionally mature*. Effective leaders have high emotional intelligence (EQ). They are able to engage others in mature, interdependent and mutually beneficial relationships. They use the heart as well as head;

10. *culturally sensitive*. They are capable of sensitive discernment with regard to human and cultural differences and respond with consideration and empathy to those who may not share their preferences. They are in tune with the cultural variabilities within their organisations.

These attributes are best developed through programs, activities and experiences that are formational in terms of their processes and intended outcomes.
FORMATION OF LEADERS

How then can leaders be better prepared to make wise choices in complex, tension filed situations? Perhaps instead of thinking in terms of preparation and training for leaders, it would be more useful, first, to focus on their formation as ‘depthed’ human beings. Such formation approaches and programs should help expand leaders’ horizons and get them to appreciate that learning and self development are ‘wholistic’, involving them in networks of meaning and significance and connecting them to the universe of knowledge and to their wholeness as human beings (Kelly, 2002) Leaders, today, should not only be good managers and efficient and productive practitioners, but also good human beings.

Formation processes should assist leaders to develop their own ethical and moral frameworks for the study and analysis of the complex problems and tensions they face each day. The challenge is to combine the intellectual, moral and spiritual into frameworks that help transcend knowledge generation and skills development to one of reflective critique of contemporary dilemmas, the promotion of personal and professional growth and its development through an exploration of what it means to be human.

Central to formation programs for leaders in contemporary service organisations, therefore, should be a focus on ethical and moral conduct. There is a need to raise the ethical bar for leaders in many contemporary organisations.

COMMITMENT TO ETHICAL AND MORAL CONDUCT: BEING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

Authentic leaders are centrally concerned with ethics and morality and with deciding, what is right and what is worthwhile. Authenticity in leadership calls for a radical shift away from much of the traditional, conventional wisdom about leadership. It is based on personal integrity and credibility, trusting relationship and commitment to ethical and moral conduct.

The focus is on "elevating leaders' moral reasoning" (Terry, 1993) which is also central to Burns' (1978) distinction between leadership that is transactional and that which is transformational. Burns (1978) states that transforming leadership "occurs
when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality”.

Duignan (2002a) argues that a critical distinguishing quality of authentic leaders is their capability to elevate the spirits of those around them and improve the human condition through their presence and contributions. They make a difference to the lives of those people they ‘touch’, either directly or indirectly. We can ask why people such as Gandhi, Mandela and Mother Theresa, among others, are usually regarded as influential leaders of the twentieth century. It can be argued that their presence and contributions made this a better world for all of us and that they elevated the human condition by ‘raising the bar’ on what it means to be truly human – we all have something to aim for because they lived.

It needs to be stated, however, that the ideal of authenticity is not about leaders behaving as saints, or pious, self-righteous people. It is about everyday full-blooded people who are politically and economically aware, credible, earthly and practical. Despite their human frailties, they strive to be ethical, caring, and conscience driven in a world that can often be cruel and uncaring. They don’t always get it right but they try to live their values to the best of their ability. They make mistakes but they learn from them.

Authentic leaders have not only a responsibility for growing leadership within their organisations (see section on ‘building a culture of leadership in organisations’), but they need to develop and grow ‘the self’ as well. Discovering and developing ‘authentic self’ is perhaps the greatest challenge for any leader.

**Developing Authentic Self**

An authentic leader is, above all, a person of integrity - a person we can trust. Authenticity, like charity, begins at home, with the self. A challenge throughout life’s journey is to discover authentic self. The following questions can help each one of us discover this self. They are questions that we can reflect on as part of a self-development activity or they could form the basis for a leadership formation program aimed at self development.
1. Who am I, really?
2. What gives me a sense of my inner legitimacy and authenticity?
3. From where do I draw my strength to engage with difficult challenges?
4. What values do I hold that will guide me in my life and work?
5. What is my platform that will allow me to ‘stand tall’ and see the road ahead?
6. What inner reservoir of strength can I draw on in order to feel confident of my capability as a leader?
7. How can I develop the capacity to generate and sustain mature, interdependent relationships?
8. How can I grow my emotional intelligence in order to be a ‘depthed’ human being?
9. What have been significant signposts that have helped me so far in my life/career?
10. What have been the ‘special human moments’, the ‘character defining events’, that have helped shape my emotional growth and development?
11. Who have been the significant people I have encountered who have influenced my life?
12. How do I contribute, or make a difference, and thereby help elevate the spirits and improve the human condition of those I encounter on my life’s journey?

Each one of us has to find the answers to these questions for ourselves. My answers may not be relevant for you. However, the answers can assist each of us chart an authentic path for the future, a path with purpose, direction and meaning. The path to authenticity is a path of critical reflection, learning and growth.

As stated earlier, authentic leadership is, above all, concerned with ethics and morality. We now turn to a discussion on ethical discernment in situations of tension or dilemma.

**ETHICAL DECISION MAKING**

There is some discussion both in academic circles and among the professions about whether or not ethics can be taught. Some contend that ethics and values are learned at ‘mother’s knee’ or in Church or Sunday school. They say that if a person has not developed a set of values and a sense of integrity by the time he or she reaches adulthood, then it is too late to start. They argue that it is too late to try and change the person’s basic value system. But is that the case? If people become
more aware of the demands of ethical integrity is there any reason why they cannot further develop their character?

Respondents in the SOLR project had their own opinions on this issue. A police respondent stated: “I think it all goes back to your upbringing and I don’t think integrity is something that can be learned”. A principal suggested that it was all rather simple: “And very simply, ‘To thine own self be true’. At the end of the day I don’t have to live with my boss but I do have to live with myself”.

Is there any coherent reason why an adult cannot learn to develop ethical skills of reasoning and judgement? We contend that there isn’t.

To assist leaders to consider the ethical dimensions of a tension situation and make informed and wise choices in a right-and-right world, we propose the following ethical decision-making method.

Method for Ethical Decision Making

1. Identify the core ethical issue or issues involved;
2. Make sure you understand the facts;
3. Identify the main players in this issue and see if you can identify their interests;
4. List the values and ethical tensions (as in chapter 7 of the main report) at stake or in conflict in this matter;
5. Critically reflect on the possible options and their likely consequences;
6. Choose the option you think best caters for the values and ethical standards you believe to be important;
7. Give reasons (to yourself or others) why you have chosen this option and show why it is a better resolution of the issue than the other options; and
8. Make the decision but look for honest feedback and keep an open mind.

We strongly recommend that ethical and moral frameworks with both theoretical (nature of ethics and ethical perspectives) and practical (living ethics) dimensions be included in formation programs for leaders. Recent scandals in both the business and service organisation contexts clearly signal the need for such formation.
BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP

While leaders need to be supported through programs of professional development, such as in short-courses and mentoring, there is a need for organisations to think differently about promoting the quality and depth of their leadership. Leaders often find themselves isolated and alone, believing that they are, primarily, responsible for the leadership of their organisation. This constitutes a very narrow view of leadership and one that is fraught with danger. Too many ‘lone-ranger’ leaders suffer from stress and burnout, or sacrifice ‘life’ (balance in life, disruption of family life) for the sake of ambition or ‘the job’. Leaders need to be secure enough in their own identity to freely share and distribute leadership responsibilities, and create a culture where others willingly participate in such responsibilities. Such sharing is, however, not merely a matter of splitting or distributing tasks and responsibilities in a task-oriented approach.

Sharing leadership with others, however, requires a rethinking of what constitutes leadership in an organisation and how best to enable all organisational members to feel a deep sense of commitment and belonging. The assumptions underpinning central issues of leadership, such as power, authority, influence, position, status, responsibility, accountability, as well as personal and professional relationships, need to be surfaced, critiqued and adjusted where necessary, to help create this culture of leadership.

For example, as long as the belief predominates in schools that ‘the buck stops on the principal’s desk’, true sharing of leadership is unlikely to occur. Those in formal leadership positions will need to ‘let go’ of the idea the leadership is hierarchically distributed and they should commit to growing and developing leadership in others. The rhetoric of shared leadership may be the espoused view in many organisations, but the reality will be that most members of the organisation may feel disempowered, even alienated. In such a situation, they are unlikely to feel that they are valued contributors to the leadership of the organisation.

It is time to take a fresh look at how leadership capacity is generated in contemporary service organisations. Leadership, as both concept and practice, should be reinterpreted to include the contributions of all who work in the organisation. Leadership is not the property of any one individual (The Boss) or group (Executive Team). It grows out of the shared vision, beliefs and efforts of a committed group.
who have a sense of belonging, a sense of being valued members of the organisation. While the language of leadership is replete with the jargon of sharing and collaboration (e.g., inclusivity; caring; collaborative decision making; empowerment of followers; shared vision and goals), too frequently the language constitutes a rhetoric that is never realised. We need to make the rhetoric the reality for organisational members.

We could start by developing a comprehensive framework for leadership in the organisation. We should name and validate the nature, scope, purpose and dimensions of leadership for the organisation. Then individuals could be profiled as to how best they can contribute to leadership in the organisation. The intent is to develop the capacity of individuals to demonstrate leadership and to enhance their skills, confidence and willingness to take responsibility for making decisions on their own. This assumes, of course, that they have access to (or will be given access to) the key information required to make the decision. This constitutes another form of ‘letting go’ by those in formal positions of leadership.

All members of the organisation, including newly arrived staff, should have a clear picture of their special place in the leadership framework for the organisation. They must feel that, no matter at what level or in what area, they are valued as significant contributors to the leadership of the organisation. This, essentially, constitutes a change in mindsets or paradigm about the nature of leadership in contemporary organisations.

A major recommendation of the SOLR Project is that the ‘depth’ of leadership in the many organisations needs to be enhanced. An organisation with ‘depth on the bench’ is more likely to succeed. Most sports teams that are successful over the long haul, have what is referred to as ‘depth on the bench’. Sometimes their key players, or on-field leaders, get injured but their reserves on the bench have the capability to step into the breach. Organisations, too, need reserves of leadership if they are to be successful in the long term. These leaders, of course, should not be on the bench but in the game, participating with skill, commitment and enthusiasm. A benefit in having a depth of leadership in an organisation is that it creates a larger and deeper pool of leaders from which future executives and middle managers can be selected.

The leadership profile developed for each staff member should assist in his/her career planning and for the development of leadership formation programs.
customised to his/her developmental needs. These developmental needs should be interpreted in terms of the comprehensive leadership framework discussed earlier. Profiling should be repeated every 2-3 years (developmental profiling) to chart the progress of each staff member in terms of the leadership framework. This approach, therefore, constitutes a systematic attempt to build a culture of leadership in the organisation.

IN CONCLUSION

Throughout the lengthy process of collecting and analysing data in the SOLR project, it has become clear that the majority of those in leadership positions in service organisations face numerous challenges that defy easy solution. The complexities and pressures of contemporary organisations place increasing demands and expectations on their leaders. Many of the challenges can be categorised as dilemmas or tensions involving a contestation of values or ethical positions that require both/and, not either/or, decision approaches. Most of the difficult challenges contain tensions that are often characterised by right-and-right considerations and not right-and-wrong. Most leaders have not been prepared to deal with such complex and tension-filled situations.

It is proposed in the SOLR Report that leaders in contemporary service organisations need formation in terms of the development of ethical and moral frameworks for action, as well as in competencies. They require unique attributes that combine intellectual and moral dimensions to succeed in a world that is, frequently, driven by economic and materialistic forces and relativistic values.

A challenge for leaders of service organisations is to build cultures of leadership within which all organisational members have a sense that they are valued, that they contribute to leadership in the organisation. To achieve this, a number of current assumptions about the nature of leadership, power, authority, responsibility and accountability need to be challenged and adjusted to fit with the concepts of shared, distributed or depth of leadership in an organisation. Professional development programs (eg., short courses and mentoring) constitute a useful commitment to the continuous improvement of leadership practice in organisations, but if we wish to create organisations that are ‘alive with leadership’ a more wholistic perspective of what constitutes leadership in an organisation needs to be explored. Building a
culture of leadership, or developing the leadership capacity of an organisation, are recommended as ways forward to achieve such an wholistic goal.