

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT WITHIN SURF LIFE SAVING AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership as a capacity within individuals and organisations is not well understood. Training approaches to developing leadership capacity in volunteer organisations are even less well understood.

Leadership begins with self-leadership. Self-leadership involves individuals developing understandings relating to self-awareness and their capacity to generate positive relationships around them. These emotional intelligences are complemented by understandings of the ‘big picture’ of societal and community context. Leadership is rudderless unless it is enacted as an intentional action within a context of change. And change requires an understanding of the dynamics, relationships and pressures impacting upon potential followers and the organisation.

This paper will look at the approach Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) is taking towards the development of leadership. The paper will provide a brief theoretical framework for leadership development, and will provide examples of programs that deliver leadership training to members.

NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

Much has been written about leadership in terms of leaders and leadership styles (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Little has been written about leadership development. There is a strong focus in the literature on demonstrating capability in leadership (i.e. demonstrating leadership), but there is a more limited focus on developing the capacity for leadership within individuals (i.e. leadership development). Rather than focussing on observed capabilities demonstrated by leaders from the outside, SLSA focuses on developing qualities within individuals that develop a capacity to engage in leadership.

Much as an athlete will train to improve their strength, coordination and endurance, so leaders develop their leadership capacities (i.e. skills, knowledge, understandings and competencies). As athletes train to be able to perform in competition, so leaders develop their capacities that will enable them to be capable of performing in the leadership arena when a situation presents itself.

A common focus in the leadership literature discusses leaders’ qualities, leadership styles and issues involved in delivering leadership capability. SLSA’s focus is more on developing the personal qualities that equip an individual with an increased capacity for leadership.

The author takes the position that leadership development is implicit in the activities of surf life saving, and that leadership is developed across all members. He views SLSA as engaging in building leadership capacity and density across the organisation.

The surf life saving experience challenges individuals to stretch themselves beyond their perceived limits; physically, mentally, and emotionally. It does this within a social context that emphasises teamwork, discipline and camaraderie. Surf lifesavers learn to stretch their potential. They learn to challenge their boundaries. They gain confidence in operating outside of their comfort zone. They take measured risks. They gain confidence in themselves and those around them. In the final analysis, leadership is about decision making and decision taking. Decisions are at the sharp end of leadership, and the surf life saving experience equips surf lifesavers for making and taking decisions under pressure. Surf lifesavers make decisions that risk their own lives, and the lives of others.

An emerging focus in the leadership literature is authentic leadership (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Authentic leaders can be seen as “genuine leaders who lead by example in fostering healthy ethical climates characterized by transparency, trust, integrity, and high moral standards...(They) are not only true to themselves, but lead others by helping them to likewise achieve authenticity” (Gardner et al., 2005). Gardner et al. go on to explain that leaders achieve authenticity through self-awareness, self-acceptance, authentic actions, and authentic relationships. Authentic relations with followers and associates are characterised by transparency, openness, trust, guidance towards worthy objectives, and an emphasis on follower development. This involves being true to one’s core beliefs and values, and exhibiting authentic behaviour.

The author posits that the experience gained through surf life saving, coupled with a supportive organisational culture of teamwork that supports that experience, provides a learning environment that encourages the development of authenticity. Surf lifesavers need to trust themselves and the team around them when lives are at risk, and they gain a strong reliance on trusting the true character of those who share that risk with them.

It is against the background of authenticity, and in a context of teamwork and risk, that surf lifesavers gain a better understanding of themselves and those around them. This is the context of leadership development within SLSA. The surf life saving experience challenges individuals to get to know themselves better, and to gain a heightened appreciation of their capabilities within a team setting.

In a rescue setting that emphasises teamwork and trust when the environment (the people and the sea) is out of control and surf lifesavers need to be in control (of themselves, others and the rescue), it is difficult for people not to be authentic (i.e. true to themselves).

SLSA LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

Leadership is recognized as a critical element to the health and well being of SLSA (Surf, Life, Saving, & Australia, 2006). Leadership provides SLSA with the path into the future: a path that will cross uncharted terrain characterised by uncertainty, constant change, and the inevitable review, renewal and realignment with forces beyond SLSA.

Leadership begins with self-leadership. Without a heightened awareness of intra-personal and inter-personal skills and abilities, individuals will be limited in regard to the conscious platform upon which they base deliberative leadership actions beyond themselves. ‘Know thyself’ is a prerequisite to the leadership journey.

Leadership of others in a challenging world requires an essential prerequisite: an understanding of the complexity of the ‘big picture’, including an understanding of the cultural influences within and outside of the organisation, and, an understanding of the political contexts impacting on that leadership (both within the organisation and beyond).

The future is becoming increasingly more complex for leaders of all organisations. For leaders of surf lifesaving enterprises, the future presents the challenge of changing values, attitudes and experiences encompassing all areas of activity. Leaders within SLSA require a broad understanding of regional, national and international trends and issues to enable them to respond to change to the long-term benefit of the organisation.

Organisations such as SLSA need to consider both the development of leadership capacity and depth within its membership, as well as supporting current leaders to actively engage in delivering leadership capability by providing strategic stewardship. Such a bifocal approach to organisational leadership is complicated in an organisation like SLSA as it exists as a collaborative of separate legal entities brought together through a common purpose in what can be called a “loosely coupled organisation” where each entity “asserts both autonomous distinctiveness and interdependence” (Limerick & Cunnington, 1993, p.38).

The SLSA Leadership Strategy and its associated Leadership Program aims to influence the development of leadership capacity building across all entities. By developing the capacity to build leadership density across entities, SLSA strives to ensure that there are sufficient members with leadership aspirations and capacity to lead the organisation into the future.

SLSA, as a national entity, does not conduct leadership development programs across Australia. What it does do is provide models for good practice. It continually extends innovative practices in leadership development and provides model programs to inform state and club practice.

However, an integrated national approach provides for leadership development across all levels of SLSA. A developmental sequence encourages hands-on awareness at a club level, to facilitation at a state level, to more strategic leadership at the national level.

The SLSA Leadership Strategy is structured around three key elements:

1. An Integrated Club / State / National Approach

Leadership development within SLSA takes place at differing levels of the organisation; club, branch, state and national. Each level has a particular focus, and each prepares members for leadership at those levels.

Clubs: At a club level, leadership is very much hands on and intuitive. Encouraging leadership development and the identification of leadership potential are key foci. At a club level, effective leadership concentrates on getting things done with a high level of participation. The nurturing of club presidents and other core executive positions is an important emphasis at this level.

States: At a state level, activities focus upon equipping members with experiences, understandings, knowledge and skills to enable them to foster leadership by connecting club with state leadership. States need to have a working understanding of how they can support leadership development for both operational club needs and their own strategic needs.

National: At the national level, there are three key outcomes: the development and trialling of new practice, the championing of best practice, and, the facilitation of leadership improvement across states.

2. SLSA Leadership Competencies Framework

Surf Life Saving Australia provides experiences, knowledge, skills and understandings that challenge the individual to develop greater self-awareness within a context that is characterised by the uncontrollable elements of weather and sea. Surf lifesavers are trained to use both self-discipline and established practices (management), and, initiative and flexibility (leadership). They develop skills that are used in both expected, known circumstances, as well as in circumstances that are characterised by the challenge of the unknown.

The SLSA Leadership Competencies Framework (SLSA, 2004) was designed to be considered with the view to developing leadership through each level, where each level acts as a stepping stone. It is a framework that distinguishes between emotional intelligence, management and leadership, and in doing so, maps the complex field of leadership. The framework is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Leadership Competencies Framework Grid

Emotional Intelligence	Leadership	Management
Personal	Lifesaving Leadership	Lifesaving Management
Self Awareness	Organizational Leadership	Organizational Management
Self Management	Cultural Leadership	
Social	Political Leadership	
Social Awareness		
Relationship Management		

It should not be expected that an individual will display strengths across the full range of leadership competencies. A focus on teamwork encourages the formation of teams that draw on individuals' strengths to cover the range of competencies. Members bring a diverse range of skills and experiences to the organisation, and each member brings a unique perspective and set of experiences that contribute to task achievement within a team setting.

3. SLSA Leadership Programs

Within the context outlined above, Surf Life Saving Australia delivers a leadership program that provides leadership training at the national level to members across four program strands.

3.1 SLSA Leadership Development Conference (emerging leaders - 20-30 years)

This program caters for 30 members who hold entry-level leadership positions within their clubs. A prerequisite is to have attended a state-based leadership camp. The target group for this conference are young emerging leaders with leadership potential.

The conference duration is six 6 days. The program includes self-awareness challenges, relationship development, and the development of an understanding of the 'big picture'. Conference facilitation is provided by a team comprising peer mentors (selected graduates of previous programs), and members of the SLSA Board of Development (BOD).

Since 1989, around 940 members have participated in this program. Participants from this program have provided a depth of leadership capacity that has served SLSA well over the past 19 years.

3.2 SLSA Leaders Conference (current leaders - 30+ years)

The target group for this conference are current Club Presidents (or targeted future Club Presidents) who have either entered Surf Life Saving at a mature age, or re-entered SLS after an extended absence.

The conference caters for 22 Club Presidents and is a 4-day program. The program harnesses the experience and skill sets of participants and is focussed on high performance leadership. Conference facilitation is provided by a team consisting of experienced Club Presidents who act as peer mentors, and members of the BOD.

SLSA introduced this conference strand in 2002, and has conducted three such programs under the title "SLSA High Performance Leadership Conference"

3.3 SLSA Leadership Forum Series (identified champions providing organisational leadership)

The Forum Series focuses on issues that are confronting SLSA, and has the purpose of providing SLSA with good practice guides based on innovative practice within clubs. Each Forum is conducted over three days and targets members who are seen as champions of the identified issue (eg. Youth, Women, Cultural Diversity). The working nature of the Forum Series limits attendance to 16 participants. Forum facilitation is provided by members of the BOD, and it is expected that outcomes will inform and impact upon SLSA practice. These Forums package innovative practice and ensures the communication of that practice across the organisation.

3.4 SLSA Leadership Scholarship (Sir Adrian Curlewis Scholarship – 21+ years)

The SLSA Leadership (Sir Adrian Curlewis) Scholarship extends for 12 months. Each state selects its Curlewis Scholar on the basis of 3 criteria:

- a. demonstrated potential for leadership within SLSA
- b. value of a nominated project to the state
- c. quality and relevance of the personal development goals

The 12-month program includes

- i. an introductory teleconference to clarify scholarship expectations.
- ii. a state facilitated meeting to establish the project and state support
- iii. two face-to-face 3-day workshops in Sydney for scholars involving progress reports on project, personal development activities to address expressed needs, and personal development counselling.
- iv. a final project report

3.5 SLSA Club Presidents' Conference (every 4 years)

Every 4 years, SLSA brings together all Club Presidents (305) for a 2-day conference. This conference provides an opportunity for key leaders within SLSA to discuss a range of issues confronting the organisation, and to hear about the latest developments taking SLSA forward.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The volunteering experience builds social capital within communities (Fahey, 2003). A reserve of goodwill, the willingness to help others, and networked relationships are important within any volunteer organisation. That accumulated wealth of community spirit and community action has benefits well beyond the bounds of the organisation.

SLSA builds social capital through the skills, knowledge and understandings developed by the surf life saving experience, and surf lifesavers take that expertise into their daily lives, to the benefit of the wider community. The development of leadership capacity within surf lifesavers is the important contribution SLSA makes to building social capital within the Australian community.

Not only does the surf life saving experience aim to develop great surf lifesavers, it also aims to contribute to the development of great Australians. It places leadership at the core of building social capital. Organisations such as SLSA contribute to building social capital as a result of the volunteering experience they provide to the community.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- (a) Self leadership is the fundamental building block for leadership.
- (b) Rescue training in uncontrollable environments challenges individuals to improve self-awareness, and to gain a heightened appreciation of their capabilities within a team setting.
- (c) Leadership involves decision making and decision taking, both individually and in teams. When people train in situations involving risk, they learn much how they make decisions when faced with risk.
- (d) Leadership development in organisations needs to have a dual leadership focus. On the one hand, there is the need to develop leadership capacity throughout the membership to ensure sufficient leadership density to cover future demands. On the other hand, there is the need to foster high performance leadership to ensure that current leaders have the capability to meet current organisational challenges.
- (e) Organisations need to be aware of the social capital they contribute to the community as a result of their activity. Articulating the development of social capital is a valuable attractor for community, government, and corporate support.

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