



Using LEADCAT® to refresh leaders and change culture

An interview about the value of LEADCAT® with Kerry Penton,
Institute Director, TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute

Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell, 24 October 2011. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Kerry Penton.

Purpose and audience

The purposes of this interview are to:

- stimulate ideas about how to use LEADCAT® in VET to enrich leadership practice
- encourage the development of a national community of practice among users of capability analysis tool (CAT) users who are focused on improving quality and performance in their registered training organisations (RTOs).

The intended audience for this document are peers of Kerry Penton who can use LEADCAT™ to enhance VET leadership.

Definition: MANEX is the Institute's management executive group of ten people; the senior group in the Institute.

The Institute received a LEADCAT® report on MANEX as a group and each of the ten members received their own report. Please see the background to the use of LEADCAT® in the Appendix.

THE INTERVIEW

What were some of the leadership challenges facing management executive earlier this year?

Whilst there are challenges, our team is a mix of highly professional individuals who are committed to the organisation and its future. There was a sense of the need for change and a strong desire as individuals to lead this. We observed that, whilst we could quite rightly claim to be a highly successful organisation, we needed to ask the questions: will the current business model, practices and leadership approach secure this success into the future?

There were three major issues. Firstly, we knew that the environment around us was changing both at the national and state level and we wanted to be more conscious of the issues around those changes and whether we were risk-managing the organisation to meet those challenges.

The second issue was that the team had been very stable and the organisation had been very stable with the one Institute Director for 13 years and the same mix of people in the senior management team, MANEX. Whilst there had been a couple of changes of personnel in the last couple of years in MANEX, it still remained for all intents and purposes relatively stable. That's been a very positive thing for the Institute but I then had to weigh up the negatives of long-term stability: it was both a positive and a negative from the group's perspective and from the organisation's perspective.

That led to my observation that MANEX had become I believe too focused on the detail and entrenched in some ways in the details, and not moving and lifting up their sights to the strategic level.

The third issue was that I was appointed as the new Institute Director in September last year. I came from within the organisation, I knew there was no crisis of in the leadership team but I knew there needed to be a "refresh". I also was using the LEADCAT® project as a precursor to our move to an organisational review. So the project was also about preparing the group and the individuals for what that reform and review may bring.

What were some of your aims in commissioning LEADCAT® and the associated workshops and mentoring, earlier this year?

We wanted to use LEADCAT® to focus on the organisation, the team and then the individuals within the team.

From an organisational perspective, the areas around leadership, leadership development, and capability development are areas that previously we had ventured into fairly narrowly. It's my view that organisational reform and change needs to be led from the top; it requires modelling by leaders.

We needed to really look at and assist the individual senior managers. Some of them are very longstanding senior managers in the organisation, ten years plus, and others have been with us two or three years, but the majority are in the former category. We needed to get them to reflect on their own leadership capabilities and their own leadership aspirations; to reflect on what their capabilities are in their current role and context now, and what they need to be in a new paradigm and a new context. We needed them to reflect on where we need to take the organisation.

We also needed the senior managers to link their reflections to their own personal professional development. It is really important from my perspective that their capability development is linked to their work plan so that we have a whole capability development framework as opposed to looking at managers' key performance indicators in isolation; it's more of a holistic approach.

We also wanted to develop a team approach to leadership based on the aspirations of the team. Also it was really important to have the leadership team reflecting on the dynamics of the team.

Taking that time out to actually work through the processes such as workshops that you and I developed around the generic LEADCAT® tool, customised to this particular group, I found very useful. And certainly the team did as well.

What were some of the leadership strengths of MANEX identified by LEADCAT®?

The first and the really important one from the group's perspective, and it emerged particularly when we talked through the report you prepared, is that you confirmed back to us and the LEADCAT® report did too, that we don't have a crisis, that it's a good team with very capable individuals, but the challenge is about how do we actually lift ourselves to the next level.

The LEADCAT® report shows that the strengths of this particular team are around commercial acumen, high levels of conscientiousness as well, moderate levels of openness which was positive, and also moderate levels of extroversion. Those findings are positive and they link to the skills and strengths that we need in leading the organisation through this period of change.

What are some of the leadership development challenges of MANEX identified by LEADCAT®?

The LEADCAT® process provided perspective; and it confirmed some of my thinking or gut feeling through a structured process. Everybody bought into it and therefore everybody got the best things out of it. The LEADCAT® project lifted us out of the detail, lifted us out of the day-to-day busy work and made us focus on the way that we operate as individuals and as a group, even the way our meetings are structured, how we consider issues and what issues the group needs to consider.

The really strong focus of the LEADCAT® project was moving MANEX to focus on the strategic issues. The project showed that we needed to change some of the organisation culture; to remove the silos. We'd often talked in the organisation about the fact that we're a silo-based organisation, but the LEADCAT® project showed that the silos were actually happening in the leadership team unconsciously.

We can now use this knowledge to inform the the organisational reforms to ensure that we guard against the things that we know – like the silos – and we have the data to back that up.

What do you think was valuable about each member of MANEX working through the LEADCAT individual reports in a mentoring session?

This time out for mentoring was one of the key things I could give to the team as a leader; we'd never done it in the organisation before, particularly in a structured way, and all of the team members later expressed to me the value of it.

The external mentoring allowed an independent discussion. You were an independent set of eyes and an independent observer and all the managers commented that you put them in a place where you were a trusted sounding board.

We all had a commitment to confidentiality around the individual LEADCAT® reports and around that individual mentoring session, and your style through the workshops developed that sense of trust. The trust was built by individuals going through the first workshop then doing the LEADCAT® survey and then having time to look at their own report and look at the group report as well – which was important to give that individual report a context – and then having their mentoring session. They got to know you and obviously the process and then developed that trust for you to be a sounding board. That description of the process was something that came out of discussions with MANEX on a couple of occasions.

Most of the MANEX members actually brought their reports to me in our individual meetings. So they felt confident and again that enabled me to develop that level of trust with them; it's all about trust when you get to that very personal level of leadership.

In the workshops, the concept of 'a health check' for MANEX was well received by the group. How useful is the concept of a health check for you?

It's extremely useful. When you're trying to change the culture and longstanding practices and models of behaviour, I think the notion of a health check allows you in a systematic way to ensure that you actually are making changes. In our last MANEX meeting we reviewed the LEADCAT® report and had a discussion around it, so it's been an ongoing point of discussion for the group and that's reinforced to me the value of it.

There's been a high degree of commitment from the group to the process, and one of the requests from the group was to actually get you back to do a catch-up with you to really challenge us around 'Well we need this new level of commitment. Have we really moved forward? And how can we measure that and ensure that the progress continues over time, that you don't then slip back into the old ways of doing things?'

Because we've been through it together, we're all on the same page, we can have that common conversation. We can use the common language that you've brought to our conversations; we can look at the issues rather than at the individual, and that's been very useful. We have individuals on MANEX actually referring back to the LEADCAT® report, talking about it, raising it. That gives a sense of the value of LEADCAT®.

How are you continuing to encourage MANEX members to reflect and deepen their leadership skills, as identified by LEADCAT®?

Well you've certainly unleashed the momentum. With all of the individual members, we've been working through their annual work plans and their professional development plans and everyone's embedded some personal goals within those which has been very, very positive.

We've also discussed and developed a group professional development plan which we've already started to enact. The plan addresses some of those key observations that you brought to the table around silos and strategic thinking and looking outwards. For example, we call them our "Go Find Out" strategy. We were looking at the release of the discussion paper for New South Wales, we were reflecting and talking about the reform in Victoria and I made the comment at one of our meetings that we need to have a 'go find out' trip to the Victoria, to really get in and find out. We've read the papers but we needed to find out what it means on the ground for institutes and providers and my comment was we need to get a team of people down there.

One of the members came back and said I think the team needs to be in this too; it needs to be an executive team. So we took three days out and we went down to Victoria. We split up into groups of three and four, we brought a couple of our other senior staff onto the project, and each team visited three institutes or dual sector providers and one of the teams also went to Skills Victoria. We did an in-depth analysis of how are the reforms working, what's not, where are the challenges. We developed a set of questions before we went, we sent them out to everyone we were visiting, and because we were coming off this common platform it actually enabled us then to collate all of the data which we're now using as input into the reform consultations of New South Wales. It's enabled us as a group to be far better positioned to comment and to think about what are the key issues for us; and we've brought that context into our business planning for 2012.

While away we had dinner together and even though people know each other, like you said, our people are a bit siloed, a bit disconnected. Now I feel a very strong sense of connectedness in our team so that we're positioned well. I hear comments from staff that MANEX seems different; they're communicating differently; they're focusing on different things. I've had unsolicited comments and observations made about MANEX that the behaviour, the modelling, the focus is different.

While the group discussions in MANEX are really focused on the reform agendas, when we're talking about an agenda item we'll reflect on how we should have been considering it, given our discussions with you. So *the way* we discuss issues is quite front of mind and we won't let it slip to the back of mind. The reflection complements our professional development; it is so easy to do.

We have taken other opportunities within the organisation to actually get members of the MANEX team cross-functionally working together on projects that they wouldn't have normally got involved in. We've been doing it through our business plan this year and that's been very, very successful and that'll continue. We have talked about the value of that and particularly getting the team members leading areas of the organisations or projects within the organisation that they wouldn't have historically done.

Some have felt extremely challenged by it but are stepping up and others are more comfortable. I've been very proud of everyone because in a short space of time it has taken them outside their comfort zone, but they've been very willing. You saw that potential in the group: the openness to learning and the openness to new ideas. To maximise that opportunity to develop ourselves was really a great gift and I think we've been able, through this LEADCAT® process, to really get the best out of the team that I could have asked for.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about leadership which I haven't asked about?

Given the notion of culture within an organisation, the value of leadership is absolutely paramount, especially in the current environment, in the current context of organisational change. The value of leadership needs to be role-modelled from myself as the organisational leader, and right through the organisation, as well as the notion of honest leadership and leadership with integrity and ethical leadership.

Leadership is also about linking personal responsibility and organisational responsibility. It's about adapting and reflecting personally and organisationally on the values of the organisation and what really is the model of good leadership. And you can't rest on your laurels: leadership is about moving forward, it's about growth, change and adaptability.

because the rate of the change will continue to escalate and the volume will continue to escalate. To build that organisational strength and culture is going to absolutely paramount from our point of view.

Appendix: Background to the LEADCAT® project at TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute

The LEADCAT® survey was conducted at TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute in March-April 2011 for the ten members of MANEX, the Institutes' management executive.

The project was managed by Kerry Penton (Institute Director), Paul Ingwersen (Director Human Resources) and Dr John Mitchell, who jointly planned the project from January 2011 and met throughout the project.

The aims of the project were as follows:

1. To assist the members of the Institute Executive to reflect on, identify and articulate their leadership capability and aspirations, to fit with the current and emerging VET environment and with specific strategic needs of the Institute.
2. To align this capability analysis and development with Executive members' ongoing professional development (PD) plans and performance review process; and to model the use of this process to other leaders within the Institute.
3. To align this capability analysis and development with the Executive's ongoing performance improvement as a team – ultimately leading to reinvigoration of the leadership and the organisation.

The project was structured as follows:

1. Pre-reading. March 2011.
2. First workshop. 14 March 2011.
3. Conducting of LEADCAT® survey. March-April 2011.
4. Provision of LEADCAT® reports: one for MANEX, one for each member. May 2011.
5. Individual mentoring with each member of MANEX focused on their individual LEADCAT® report. April-May 2011.
6. Second workshop. 23 May 2011.
7. Debrief report. 30 May 2011.
8. Third workshop. To be conducted 1 March 2012.