Executive leadership roles in the Australian Public Service

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Abstract

Current and future public sector executive leadership role demands are explored from a competing values perspective, using roles previously identified with a private sector population. The roles identified were vision setter, motivator, analyser and task master. The results of a 4 £ 2 £ 4 £ 2 MANOVA indicated that there were significant results for the main factors of leadership roles and time and also for the interaction of these two factors. There were no significant gender differences, with female and male Australian Public Service senior executives offering very similar assessments of current and future role demands. Both groups said that future role demands would be greater than is currently the case. Reasons for the differences in the current and future role demands are discussed, and the scope for future research is highlighted.

Introduction

Public sector executive leadership roles have been the subject of relatively little research outside of private sector models. Far more attention has been paid to identifying the capabilities that executives will require in the future, without a clear identification of the complexities and competing aspects of the executive leadership role in a public sector context. Since the mid-1980s the Australian Public Service (APS), i.e. all federal public-sector agencies, has been compelled by equal employment opportunity (EEO) legislation to develop and implement EEO policies and programmes (Halligan, 1988). However, female executives are still under-represented, particularly at the more senior levels, and represented only 28 per cent of the Senior Executive Service (SES)[1] as of June 30, 2002 (Australian Public Service Commission, 2003).

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of senior executives in the APS in relation to the current and future executive leadership role demands they face. The competing values framework (CVF), as operationalised by Hart and Quinn (1993) for executive leadership, was used to measure these roles. Within this context, the different perceptions of female and male senior executives were analysed.

The selection of the CVF as a measure for the roles examined in this study reflects its robust interpretation of the manager’s position and responsibilities. It offers a structure that expresses the complexity of the manager’s task while simultaneously providing a framework for analysis of the manager’s activities. Two key managerial dimensions are suggested by the CVF: flexibility-stability; and external/organisational-internal/people foci. The intersection of these dimensions creates a four-quadrant model which exhibits four operational roles (Hart and Quinn, 1993) (see Figure 1).

Background

Public sector executive leadership roles have not been explored independently of private sector roles. It is more common for private sector research and models to be adopted by the public sector with little or no modification for the public sector context, even though differences between public and private sector demands on executives are acknowledged (Colley, 2001).

Competing values framework

Hart and Quinn (1993) identified four executive leadership roles (i.e. vision setter, motivator,
analysers and task masters) which mapped to the
four quadrants of the competing values
framework. Each quadrant represents one of
the major models of organisation and
management theory. The CVF and corresponding
executive leadership roles are presented in Figure 1.

The vision setter role is one of creating a sense of
identity and future corporate direction and
intuition. The motivator role is that of the
management of meaning, i.e. translating the
corporate vision into priorities and goals that will
mobilise and align staff to deliver on these goals.
The analyser role focuses on the efficient
management of the internal operations of the
organisation, i.e. reviewing and evaluating
proposed ventures and ensuring that conflicting
perspectives are reconciled and addressed. The
task master role is concerned with performance
and results, both economic and social. It is a
“hands on” role with a strong focus on results and
getting the job done today (Hart and Quinn,
1993).

Research into and opinion on the public sector
executive role (Divett, 1998; Hawke, 1998;
Hyslop, 1993) has explored and emphasised
differing perspectives of the total role without the
emergence of a complete and integrated role or set
of roles. Only aspects of the APS senior executive
role have been examined, for example Codd’s
(1990) investigation of executives’ parliamentary
obligations. No researcher has claimed to have
identified all aspects of the role, nor has any
researcher presented a balanced view of the
complete managerial role.

Although Hart and Quinn’s model of executive
leadership roles was developed from research into
a large midwest American metropolitan industrial
business population, excluding agriculture,
railroads and government operations (Hart and
Quinn, 1993), preliminary research for this study
confirmed the general appropriateness of the use of
the CVF when examining APS executives. Not
only are the four managerial roles identified by
Hart and Quinn as being integral to the CVF and
characteristic of effective management appropriate
to the study, but the framework itself provides a
tool for interpreting executive attitudes and
behaviour. Therefore, in the absence of alternative
executive leadership frameworks appropriate for
the public sector, Hart and Quinn’s framework
was used in the present study.

The gender factor
The effects of gender on management behaviour
have been well researched, but the conclusions
remain equivocal. Some previous researchers
studying management behaviour reported that
there were no significant differences in the way
males and females manage (Vilkinas, 2000;
Vilkinas and Cartan, 1993, 1997). These authors
argued that it was the level of effectiveness of the
manager that determined how they were perceived
as managers, not their gender. Oshagbemi and Gill
(2003), in their study of UK male and female
managers, reported that there were more
similarities than dissimilarities in the management
styles of the two genders. Also, in a New Zealand
study in the manufacturing sector, McGregor and
Tweed (2001) reported that female and male
managers identified similar managerial
competencies that they possessed.

However, other research has argued that the
gender of the manager does matter
(Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Bass et al., 1996; Rosener,
1995, 1996); that is, male and female managers do
display different managerial behaviour. Contrary
to the above findings that male and female
managers consider themselves to share similar
competencies, other studies have observed that
women and men in management positions do
perceive themselves differently. Female managers
participating in these studies indicated that they
believed they were more innovative (Bass et al.,
1996) and better at getting the job done and
setting priorities than their male counterparts
(Alimo-Metcalfe, 1995; Bass et al., 1996; Rosener,
1996). In addition, the women expressed the
opinion that female managers were stronger team
builders and developers of their staff than were the
male managers. Van der Boon (2003) reported
that female managers used different skills from the
males in their study, with females being more...
intuitive and empathetic. In a study of the leadership style of male and female accountants, females were again found to manage differently from males. Women were perceived as more interactive, more effective in coaching, and better communicators (Burke and Collins, 2001).

None of this earlier research focussed on senior executives; and there have only been limited recent studies undertaken with the CEO population (Wood and Vilkinas, 2003, 2004), where there were only minimal differences. Research examining female executives in the public sector is similarly sparse. Most current research (e.g. Brown and Ridge, 2002; Hojgaard, 2002; Rindfleish, 2002) has investigated female representation or equity issues.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there are gender differences that significantly affect the management style of senior public service executives. In considering this possibility, the participants’ opinions were canvassed regarding their perceptions of the demands of the executive leadership role, both currently and in the future.

Methodology

Respondents

A questionnaire was mailed out to 300 senior executives in the Australian Public Service. Fifty-three senior executives from 12 different departments of various sizes and functions agreed to participate in the study. Each senior executive \((n = 53)\) then selected a set of significant others, which included their staff \((n = 54)\), peers \((n = 51)\) and bosses \((n = 49)\), to respond to the questionnaire. A total of 207 public servants participated in the study. Each of the significant others had frequent contact with and overall knowledge of the senior executive.

Of the 207 people who participated in the study, approximately one quarter \((n = 47, 22.7\%\) per cent) were female (see Table I). The majority of female significant others represented “staff”, whereas male participants were more equally spread between “staff”, “peers” and “bosses”. The female significant others had, on the whole, been in the public service for fewer years than their male counterparts, with 68.9 per cent of all female respondents having less that 20 years’ service, compared with 36.3 per cent of males. Female significant others also held positions of lower classification than males, with 78.8 per cent of all females being in middle management positions, compared with 53.8 per cent of males. However, slightly more females had private sector experience (38.3 per cent as compared with 30.0 per cent of males).

Data collection

Data were collected by a questionnaire mailed out to the 53 senior executives and their significant others. These senior executives arranged for a “set” of questionnaires (their own response, senior executive; a self-nominated boss, a peer and a staff member reporting to the senior executive) to be completed confidentially and returned in order to facilitate 360-degree views of the executive leadership role.

Respondents were requested to identify the current role the senior executive displayed and the future role demands that APS senior executives would be likely to face. The 13 items used to measure the four leadership roles that were considered for both current and future role assessment were those identified by Hart and Quinn (1993). The frequency with which the roles were performed was assessed on a six-point Likert scale, where 1 = never, 2 = very infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very frequently and 6 = always. The roles and the associated executive leadership activities as determined by Hart and Quinn (1993) are listed in Table II.

Data analysis

To calculate the role score for each respondent, the scores for each item in the role were averaged. For the analyser, motivator and vision setter roles, there were three activities which were deemed characteristic of each role. These activities provided a reference against which the performance of each role could be measured (see Table II). For the role of task master there were four characteristic activities.

To analyse the data, a mixed-effects repeated-measures MANOVA was undertaken. The within-subjects factors were leadership role (with the four levels of vision setter, motivator, analyser, task master) and time (with the two levels of current and future). The between-subjects factors were
rater (with the four levels of boss, respondent, peer or staff) and gender (male or female).

Results

Details of the mean scores of roles and their alpha coefficients are presented in Table II. The alpha coefficients for the motivator, analyser and task master are acceptable, but the vision setter’s are not strong. Results of the MANOVA to explore effects of gender, rater and leadership roles over the two time periods, and any interactions, are presented in Table III.

The main effects for time ($F = 92.332$, $df = 1.166$, $p < 0.0005$) and leadership role ($F = 36.037$, $df = 3.498$, $p < 0.0005$) were significant. The main effects for rater and gender were not significant. The two-way interaction for time and leadership role was significant ($F = 25.846$, $df = 3.498$, $p < 0.0005$). The two-way interactions for time and gender and for time and rater were not significant. All of the three-way interactions were not significant.

For the main effect of leadership role, the post hoc tests were not significant. This may be due to the post hoc tests not taking into account the correlations between the dependent variables (Haase and Ellis, 1987). Of the four leadership roles, analyser scored the highest (mean = 4.56), followed by task master (mean = 4.35), motivator (mean = 4.35) and vision setter (mean = 3.85). Pairwise comparisons between each of the roles indicated significant mean differences at the 0.05 level for all role combinations.

The significant interaction between time and leadership role indicated that the extent to which each leadership role is displayed at present was significantly different from the extent to which each role would need to be displayed in the future. Post hoc tests were not significant. This may be due to post hoc tests not taking into account the correlations between dependent variables (Haase and Ellis, 1987).

Discussion

The results of the MANOVA indicated significant effects for time and leadership role, with a significant interaction between time and leadership role, substantiating the changes observed in the current and future role demands (see Table II). For all the roles, the respondents reported that
they would be greater in the future than at present. The MANOVA did not indicate statistically significant effects for gender or rater in current and future assessments of leadership role demands.

The significant differences in scores for the leadership role indicate that the senior executives did not display “behavioural complexity” (Denison et al., 1995). That is, the senior executives were not perceived to be leaders who were able to play, at a high level, all four roles. Responses indicated that each displayed aspects of the four roles only “sometimes” to “often”, suggesting little behavioural complexity.

For the future, the senior executives and their significant others indicated that these four roles should be displayed “often” to “frequently”. These levels are approaching what is required for behavioural complexity. However, the significant differences in the frequency with which the roles are displayed does not meet behavioural complexity requirements. Hart and Quinn (1993) warned of the unbalanced playing of the task master and analyser roles, as they appeared to hamper performance, particularly with respect to business performance and organisational effectiveness. They found that the highest levels of performance were achieved by CEOs with high levels of “behavioural complexity”.

The senior executives indicated that they would need to display each of the roles more in the future. They obviously recognised the demands that are to be placed on them and recognised the need to develop their executive capability.

To explain the significant time by leadership role interaction, post hoc tests were computed and were found to be non-significant. This may be due to post hoc tests not taking into account correlations between dependent variables (Haase and Ellis, 1987).

Figure 2 shows the perceived increase in the demands of each of the leadership roles into the future. All roles show larger increases in future role demands than the task master role, with the vision setter, motivator and analyser roles being most noticeable.

Hart and Quinn (1993) identified the vision setter and motivator roles as the most important roles for organisational performance. In the current study, the analyser role was identified as most important for the future. However, this role was not linked to organisational performance in Hart and Quinn’s study, indicating that performance of the analyser role by these senior executives would not necessarily result in positive organisational performance.

For male and female senior executives participating in this research there was no significant differences in the leadership roles.

These results support other research that contends that there are no significant differences in the way females and males manage (McGregor and Tweed, 2001; Oshagbemi and Gill, 2003; Vilkinas, 2000; Vilkinas and Cartan, 1993, 1997). The lack of gender differences is surprising given that the demographic patterns of the APS senior executive leaders participating in this research indicated differences between female and male respondents. Women made up approximately one quarter of the respondents, were concentrated in the lower levels, had spent longer at the level immediately below the SES, and had shorter service in the APS than their male counterparts.

The same explanation for these results may apply as did in the Vilkinas (2000) study. Any difference found in managers reflects their effectiveness and not their gender. Previous research (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Bass et al., 1996; Rosener, 1995, 1996) reporting a significant gender difference was more narrowly focused than the current study. Earlier studies were more concerned with particular characteristics of male and female managers, such as innovativeness, intuition, team building and mentoring capabilities. The present study was broader in range.

These perceptions of public sector executive leadership roles have significant implications for the APS. While the increased importance of all roles in the future may indicate increasing role complexity, the continued dominance of the analyser role may not contribute to enhanced organisational effectiveness, as Hart and Quinn (1993) reported that the vision setter and motivator roles are linked to organisational performance and the analyser role is not.

The significant increase in the importance of the motivator role in the future is in accordance with
identified changes in the public sector management culture to a more dynamic balance between task and relationship management (Australian Public Service Commission, 1999). However, the identification of the vision setter role as the least important role for the future, albeit substantially more important than the current situation, is not in keeping with expectations of the contribution of senior executives (Australian Public Service Commission, 1999; Codd, 1990; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1996).

Both the central personnel agency and individual departments are now faced with the dilemma of clearly identifying the contribution that senior executives should make to public sector organisations to enhance organisational effectiveness. This involves an unambiguous understanding of the roles that executives will be required to perform, and the skills necessary to carry out these roles. Attracting and retaining people capable of performing these roles will present challenges for executive selection and development, career and succession planning, in addition to identifying and defining the underlying activities characteristic of the roles.

**Conclusion**

Female and male APS senior executives had similar perceptions of current and future executive leadership role demands. Their perceptions were that in the future the same management roles would be more demanding. The results of this research have implications for practitioners. Both female and male senior executives will need development in order to perform effectively in leadership roles that are increasing in complexity and demanding greater integration of roles in an individual manager. There will need to be emphasis placed on the delivery of all four roles to a far greater extent than is evident at present.

Gender differences in public sector executive leadership roles warrant further research. Such research could also address the learning and development opportunities that will best equip female senior executives to meet the identified demands of the future, as well as bridge the gap in representation at the more senior executive levels. Future research could also take the form of a contingency approach to identify which functions (e.g. policy development, service delivery) require different executive leadership behaviours associated with the roles of vision setter, motivator, analyser and task master. In addition, this study needs to be replicated in the private sector to see whether the same results are found.

**Note**

1 The senior executive cadre of the APS is known as the Senior Executive Service, with less than 1 percent of APS staff falling into this employment category.

**References**


