Assessing beliefs about capability acquisition – the design and trial of an on-line survey

By Geoff Eagleson and Ingo Susing

Summary

Despite being chosen to take part in a leadership development program, despite the desirability of appearing positive, 138 managers in a multinational corporation who responded to our survey reported that they did not believe that some leadership capabilities, identified as relevant to their roles, can be learnt.

The capabilities that were assessed differed in the extent to which they were considered difficult to acquire. As a rough rule, those relating to the leadership of 'self' were thought to be more likely to be innate. For example, 50% of the respondents thought that it was not possible to learn self-awareness. On the other hand, the capabilities thought to be most able to be learnt were those relating to the achievement of results: the setting of clear goals, converting goals into concrete plans and holding subordinates accountable.

The evidence from the first trial of our survey is strong enough that the organisation involved decided to manage proactively the developmental beliefs of its staff. By doing this they will improve the effectiveness of their programs and will mitigate the risks associated with limiting developmental beliefs.

Assessing beliefs about capability development

In our paper "Leader development will be more effective when developmental beliefs are taken into account" we demonstrated that an individual's beliefs about whether it is possible to learn and acquire leadership capabilities will influence their acceptance of, and performance in, a development program. We also showed that understanding and modifying an individual's beliefs about the possibility of developing specific leadership capabilities is critical to

enable an organisation to maximize the return from development activities and, ultimately, to successfully prepare those being considered for more senior leadership roles. But how can an organisation best do this?

The least subjective way of understanding an individual's beliefs is by observing how they are expressed through their behaviours. If a manager believes that leadership capabilities can be acquired, one would expect them to show interest in the development of their subordinates. This could involve preparing members of their team for a particular program, and ensuring that they are supported and challenged to utilize what they have learnt when the development is complete. As an alternative, or in addition to observation, one could use a survey to probe their beliefs about capability development.

A survey to measure implicit beliefs about capability development

Other researchers have demonstrated that an efficient and reliable way of assessing beliefs is through the administration of a survey even though such a process depends on self-reporting and can be subject to social desirability bias. For example, Hoyt, Burnette and Innelia (2012) previously developed a questionnaire to measure beliefs about leadership ("You have a certain amount of leadership ability and you can't really do much to change it").

One of the problems in asking for beliefs about 'leadership' is that the interpretation of the term varies from person to person. There is no agreed definition of 'leadership' in the literature. The idea of 'leadership' is vague and not well-defined. Furthermore, beliefs can be very specific. Therefore, when trying to understand how individuals view the acquisition of leadership capabilities, it is necessary to probe their beliefs about the possibility of improving specific leadership capabilities. The challenge, however, arises that there are possibly thousands of capabilities that could be candidates for investigation.

We inspected corporate descriptions of leadership capabilities and selected four well-

established categories: Personal Leadership, People Leadership, Results Leadership and Business Leadership. We then chose representative capabilities from each category. For each of these representatives a statement was written claiming either that the capability can be acquired or that it depends solely on genetics. In this way, we generated a total of 27 statements, stating either that a capability can be learnt ("Anyone can learn how to take cultural issues into account when making plans and decisions") or is innate ("Creating and communicating a compelling narrative is a skill that cannot be learnt"). These 27 statements were used in the design of an online survey.

This online survey asks a person to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with each of the 27 statements. The response to each statement is coded in a range from 1 to 6. A high score (greater than or equal to 4) indicates a belief that a particular capability can be learnt; a low score (less than or equal to 3) indicates a belief that one's potential for that capability is essentially fixed at birth, that it is more likely to be a consequence of personality than of effort.

An overview of the results from the first trial of the survey

In the first trial of the survey a total of 178 responses were obtained. The 178 respondents came from two groups: 138 senior managers who had been chosen to attend a leadership development program in 2014 all belonging to the same multinational corporation, X, and 40 senior managers from a variety of other organisations. The full data set was analysed to see whether there was a structure to the way statements were perceived. The answers to each question were reverse-scored where necessary and then used in an exploratory factor analysis that grouped together those capabilities that evoke similar responses from a participant.

The factor analysis identified five groups, with significant overlap but also some differences to the original four categories. The identified groups together cover a total of 22 capabilities that relate to "Leading Oneself", "Engaging Others", "Achieving Results", "Implementing Strategy" and "Facilitating Change". These groups of statements were used to calculate five

scales by averaging an individual's responses to the statements in each group.

We learnt from the first trial of the survey that in Corporation X:

- Respondents reported widely varying beliefs with more than a third scoring less than 4 for "Leading Oneself", "Implementing Strategy" and "Facilitating Change";
- When the scales are ranked (according to their means) they range from those thought most likely to be acquirable, namely "Achieving Results" (mean = 4.86), "Engaging Others" (mean = 4.51), "Facilitating Change" (mean = 4.16), "Implementing Strategy" (mean = 4.11), through to "Leading Oneself" (mean = 3.73).

A number of statements were seen as not able to be learnt by a substantial proportion of respondents. For example, 50% of the respondents from Corporation X thought that it was not possible to learn self-awareness.

More details about the responses to the survey from the employees of Corporation X are contained in the Appendix at the end of this paper.

The 22 capabilities we extracted from the survey form the core of the instrument which can be further customized by adding statements relating to other capabilities that are part of an organisation's leadership capability framework but are not covered by the core set of capabilities.

How to use the survey – Modifying beliefs about capability development

It is important for an individual to identify what they believe so that they can take the opportunity to reflect on and, if appropriate, modify their beliefs. Such a modification can lead to better interactions with subordinates (Heslin, Latham and VandeWalle, 2005) and more effective career development (Rhodewalt, 1994). Beliefs can be modified in many different ways: through reflection, discussions with colleagues, coaching or counter-attitudinal training.

Reflections about beliefs can be initiated by the individual, by managers or by HR professionals. For example, to make the development process more effective, all potential participants for an upcoming Leader Development Program can be surveyed to determine their espoused beliefs. The results of the survey can then be used to begin conversations about whether desired leadership capabilities are acquirable. The conversations can be among all the participants on the development program, between groups of participants and/or with individuals.

When individuals are willing to disclose to others what they believe, it is possible to discuss capability acquisition at the beginning of every program or even at the beginning of every topic in a program. Participants can be asked to share their beliefs about the possibility of learning the capabilities to be studied and to provide a justification for those beliefs. Those who believe that they can be learnt can be asked to explain why. Do they have examples, either personal or of others, that show how various capabilities have been learnt?

Individual responses to the questionnaire can be compared with those of their peers in their organization as well as with the responses of those outside the organization. Comparisons can be made of scores on a scale, of responses about specific capabilities and of the total number of capabilities that were identified as being unable to be learnt. These three comparisons can be used by the individual and/or their manager:

- To indicate general, high-level groups of capabilities for which an individual has doubts about whether they can be taught. This allows for an open discussion and reflection and allows the possibility of considering capabilities that were not mentioned in the survey. A potential downside to this approach may be that it can result in a lack of focus and specific action plans.
- To identify those specific capabilities that an individual thinks are incapable of being learnt so that these beliefs can be challenged. This will provide focus to any subsequent discussion and action plan. This approach could have the downside that reflection and discussion may be

closed and not cover other capabilities that were not in the survey.

- To show how extreme the individual's beliefs are so that they can reflect on why that might be so.

The aim of analyzing responses should be to intervene and modify beliefs, when appropriate, in order to shift an individual from a belief that a leadership capability cannot be learnt to a belief that it can be acquired, howbeit through focus, effort and time.

Optimising investment in leader development

While most potential leaders would believe that leadership capabilities can be acquired, not all do. Those who don't may not be ready to undertake development. Our survey is designed to probe whether an individual believes that a range of capabilities, generally agreed to be important for leadership success, can be developed or are more likely to be innate.

In a recent trial of the survey in a multinational corporation, more than a third of the high potential respondents did not believe that some of the organisation's "essential leadership behaviours" could be learnt. If these are the behaviours that will be the focus of the next Leadership Development Program, the organization needs to address and modify those beliefs first. Otherwise, it runs the risk of wasting scarce resources and achieving a sub-optimal return on its leader development investment.

For further information and access to the survey, please contact:
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Heslin, P. A., Latham, G. P. and VandeWalle, D., 2005, "The effect of Implicit Person Theory on Performance Appraisals", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 90, No. 5, pp. 842-856.

Hoyt, C. L., Burnette, J. L. and Innelia, A. N., 2012, "I can do that: the impact of implicit theories on leadership role model effectiveness", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 38, pp. 257-268.

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Appendix – Details of the responses to the survey by the employees of Corporation X

We present the responses from the employees of Corporation X, commenting on the implications for development plans in that organisation. The respondents were self-selected and there is no way of knowing whether they were a representative sample of the organisation for which they work, let alone of the general population. Also, it is quite likely that there may be a social desirability bias in the responses. As a consequence, 'negative' responses are likely to be under-reported and 'positive' responses over-reported.

The five scales derived from the survey are (going from those thought most difficult to learn through to those thought to be easier to learn):

Beliefs about Leading Oneself

A number of statements in the survey related to self-leadership: being self-aware and acting with integrity, for example.

Beliefs about Implementing Strategy

Implementing Strategy requires an ability to understand both the external and internal environments as well as an ability to set direction to ensure the organisation's future success. One of its components is the ability to think strategically.

Beliefs about Facilitating Change

Facilitating Change requires an ability to formulate a compelling change agenda, an ability to develop smart responses to competitor actions as well as being personally resilient.
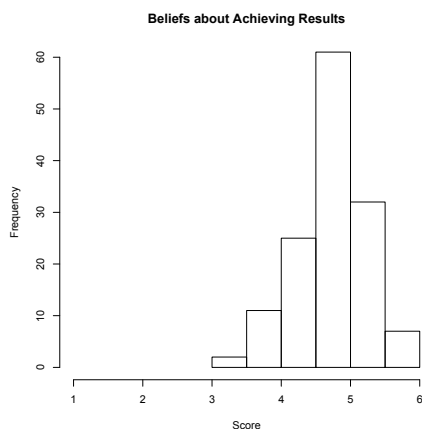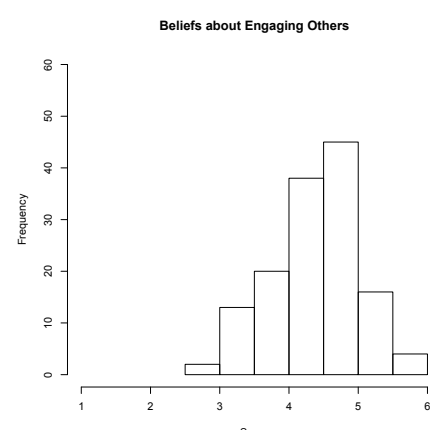
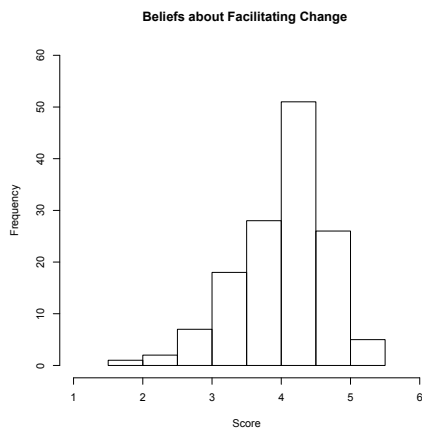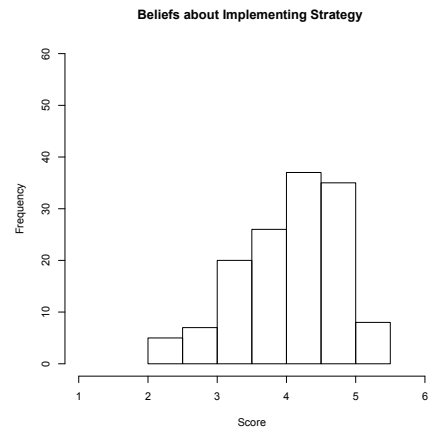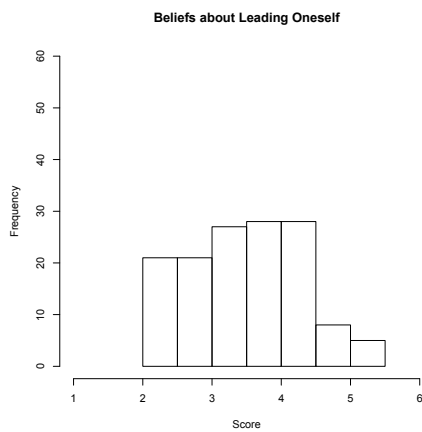***Beliefs about Engaging Others***

Engaging Others relates to the ability to leverage talent and relationships by, for example, understanding the motivations of others and building a culture of collaboration and teamwork.

Beliefs about Achieving Results

Results Leadership involves the conversion of goals into plans and the delivery through others of pre-determined objectives. This can be achieved by, among other things, setting clear goals and holding subordinates accountable.

The aggregate responses of the 138 individuals from Corporation X

Histograms of the scores on the five scales for all those from Corporation X who completed the survey (138) show how some groups of capabilities were assessed by a substantial number of respondents as unable to be learnt ("Leading Oneself"). This means that any attempt by Corporation X to develop the capabilities that make up the high level competence of "Leading Oneself" should be preceded with preparation of the participants to modify their beliefs, when appropriate, in order to mitigate the risk of sub-optimal outcomes. Other groups of capabilities that show almost all respondents believe they can be acquired ("Achieving Results", for example) would not require much preparation before being developed.

Beliefs about Leading Oneself

Beliefs about Implementing Strategy

Beliefs about Facilitating Change

Beliefs about Engaging Others

Beliefs about Achieving Results

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The scales can be compared by their average scores or by the proportion of respondents who had an average score of less than 4.

Scale	Mean Score	Proportion of scores < 4
Leading Oneself	3.62	59%
Implementing Strategy	4.11	36%
Facilitating Change	4.16	31%
Engaging Others	4.51	17%
Achieving Results	4.86	4%

The scales are significantly correlated with each other. Interestingly the smallest correlation is that between "Leading Oneself" and "Facilitating Change" (0.17) which was not expected. The relatively high correlations suggest that individuals either have a tendency to believe that most of the capabilities can be acquired or they have a tendency to believe the opposite.

***Correlations between the Scales*** (Cronbach Alphas shown along the diagonal):

	Self-leadership	Change	Strategy	Engaging	Results
Self-leadership	(0.62)	0.17	0.45	0.40	0.40
Change		(0.64)	0.38	0.35	0.35
Strategy			(0.76)	0.41	0.41
Engaging				(0.63)	0.36
Results					(0.69)

Responses to individual statements from the 138 individuals from Corporation X

The specific capabilities evoked quite different responses. For example, more than a third of the respondents from Corporation X believed that seven of their "essential leadership capabilities" could not be learnt. This will be important to keep in mind if an attempt is made to develop any of the following particular capabilities.

1. "Models and inspires high levels of integrity" (63% indicate more likely to be "innate");

2. "Generates innovative ideas and solutions to problems" (51%);

3. "Exhibits Self-awareness" (56%);

4. "Demonstrates resilience in the face of rejection, setbacks or resistance" (49%);

5. "Provides feedback, coaching and guidance where appropriate to enhance others' skill development" (36%);

6. "Thinks strategically" (35%); and

7. "Judges others appropriately" (34%).

If the organisation wants to encourage "Modeling and inspiring high levels of integrity", they should first start a conversation about whether it can be learnt as 63% of their respondents reported that they believed it more likely to be "innate". On the other hand, if the focus is on establishing the ability to "Identify the key levers that drive performance", they could introduce that topic with no prior discussion, as every one of their respondents believes that it can be learnt.

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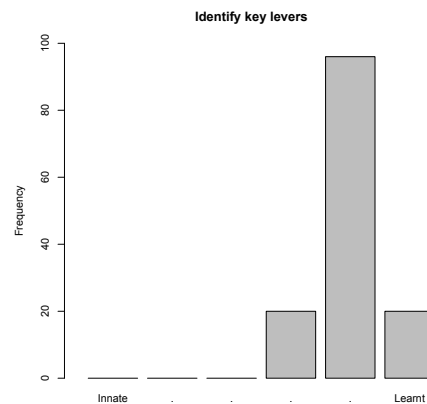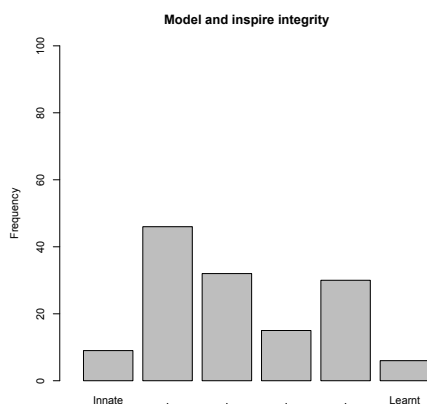
To show the extent to which different capabilities evoked quite different responses we have drawn below a histogram of the proportion of the 138 respondents who scored a specific capability less than 4, that is, as unable to be learnt. These data can be used to identify those capabilities considered by a substantial proportion of the respondents to be innate.

How different were the responses to the different capabilities?
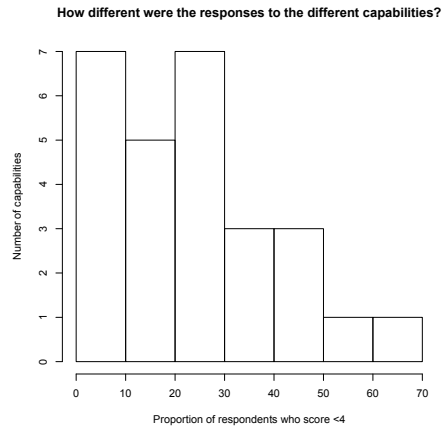
To show how variable individuals were in their responses, we have drawn below a histogram of the number of capabilities (out of 27) that were judged to be innate by the 138 respondents from Corporation X. These data can be used to identify those who would be most at risk in a development program so that they can be coached individually.

How often did respondents think a capability innate?